

“The happiest city in England”

Brighton’s narratives of diversity between ‘success stories’ and sidelined issues.

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Abstract

This article contributes to the literature on diversity. Through a focus on the local government, I enquire if the dominant narrative of Brighton and its community entails the multiple identities encompassed by the concept of diversity. If that is not the case, what significance does effectively lie behind it? And which are the consequences of this? Informed by a qualitative research, this article compares the local government’s narrative on the city and its community to the oppositional narrative shared by members of grassroots BAME associations. Brighton markets itself as an open-minded city: mainstream sources portray it as “the happiest city in England” (University of Sussex, 2020), arguing that it thrives thanks to its diverse community. However, the data gathered reveal how very often representatives of the local government discuss ‘diversity’ while actually referring to gender identity and sexuality and how this selective understanding has overtime generated resentment in racialised communities.

Keywords: diversity, narratives, local government, racism, ethnicity, UK

Introduction

This article contributes to the literature on diversity through the empirical findings of a study set in Brighton, UK. Focusing on the local government, I enquire if the dominant narrative of the city and its community entails the multiple identities encompassed by the concept of 'diversity'. If that is not the case, what significance does effectively lie behind it? And which are the consequences of this in policies? By 'dominant narrative', I refer to the one widely regarded as the 'truth' on a place to the point not to be questioned (Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates, 2001). Research (Stokowski, 2002) has shown that the degree of establishment of a narrative mainly depends on its authors' social position of power. I therefore define as the dominant (or mainstream) narrative of a city the one that is produced and fostered by local institutions, primarily the local government. In order to unpack the meaning of diversity in Brighton – and especially to identify potentially controversial aspects not encompassed in it – I juxtapose to this perspective what Fraser (1992) defines "counterpublic" and Jansson (2003) "oppositional narrative". Since my focus is onto ethnicity and race, grassroots BAME associations worked as counterpublic. I deliberately excluded other forms of diversity from my analysis: concentrating onto these two allowed me to check whether these dimensions were overlooked in the dominant narrative, and how the diversity discourse and practice is seen by BAME associations themselves.

Brighton has a well-established image as open-minded and tolerant city, thus being an ideal environment for this study. Its reputation as "the happiest city in England" (University of Sussex, 2020) is actively celebrated by local institutions such as the Council and the university: Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC, n.d.) defines it as "culturally, economically and socially diverse", while the City Snapshot Report of Statistics (BHCC, 2014) describes it as "more culturally diverse than ever before". Further, the Notice of Motion to make Brighton a City of Sanctuary states: "Brighton and Hove has a well-deserved reputation for embracing the diversity of its residents" (Green Party, n.d.). This document touches onto meaningful moments when the city opened its doors to people who fled their homes, praising the local history of welcome. Echoes of this vision of the city can be found in less institutional but more collective sources too, such as online fora. They are not the object of this enquiry, but can be

nonetheless interesting to gauge how the strong influence of mainstream narratives permeates all levels of discourse.

Through first-hand empirical data collected amongst local government's representatives and BAMEs' associations' members, this article advances and deepens our knowledge on how diversity works. Specifically, it unpacks its capability to hide "difference, inequalities, and struggles" (Benschop, 2001:1166). Although the literature on diversity is rich, there is limited knowledge on the fact that certain dimensions included in it are valued more than others, especially in institutional settings. In fact, "there is a tendency for institutions and individuals to imagine they are promoting equality or diversity in general when in fact they are only addressing a single factor" (Valverde 2012:2). With this article, I describe how the umbrella-term 'diversity' provides decision-makers with a discursive opportunity to foreground the 'success' of specific diversity strands over many other still problematic matters. In Brighton, gender identity and sexuality represent the 'success story' local politicians and policy-makers refer to when using the term 'diversity'. In contrast, race and ethnicity are given marginal consideration, generating resentment in the racialised communities.

Although my research focuses on the local level, Brighton mirrors a national image of tolerance and open-mindedness that the British establishment holds very dear (Kundnani, 2000; Goodfellow, 2019). Thus, these findings can become the basis for future research deconstructing the public image of diversity in the UK, to gauge which 'success stories' are employed to sideline which problematic ones.

Methodology

This article is based on wider research exploring the elements at the foundation of cities' narratives of receptiveness through a cross-country city-level between Brighton and Bologna. In this article, I report the results of 23 in-depth interviews conducted in Brighton between September and December 2015. The sample comprises two sub-groups of interviewees: the first includes representatives of the local government such as local politicians (councillors) and policy-makers (officers working for Council departments such as housing, education, and community safety). A couple of interviewees belonged to institutions connected to the Council

but not integral part of it, such as the police and local charities. The second sub-group of respondents encompassed instead members of grassroots BAMEs' associations¹.

This division allows for a collection of narratives from the 'public' and the 'counterpublic' (Fraser, 1992). Overall, the sample equally represents female and male interviewees (12 women to 11 men) but, while the participants from local institutions are mostly female (11 out of 15), men are over-represented in the grassroots group (7 out of 8). I am aware this imbalance, generated by the interviewees' self-selection, might have excluded important reflections on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990). The decision not to discuss it is driven by my empirical findings: the intersection of gender and ethnicity, but also of other identity dimensions such as age, did not feature in my interviewees' accounts. It is useful to keep this in mind for a development of the present research, while also reflecting on efficient ways to reach those groups that were for me difficult to contact. The participants' age range spans from mid-20s to mid-70s. Regarding their ethnic origin, two thirds of the institutional participants are white British, while, among the remaining third, two are of mixed heritage, two more are from other white backgrounds, and one is black British². The grassroots group appears more varied, with four South Asians, two Black Caribbeans, and one Arab respondent, plus one from a white background. This composition reflects the wider make-up of the local society (ONS, 2012), with a significant majority of white British individuals working in the local government.

The themes the interview touched upon were local demographics, the meaning(s) of local diversity, the reasons and/or origins behind the city's reputation, local policies for social inclusion, and discrimination and racism. Due to the sensitivity of some opinions, I decided to classify the interviewees as "Respondent 1, 2" and so on, following their own suggestion. When I approached my data analysis, for which I have relied on a Qualitative Data Analysis Software (NVivo), I was aiming at identifying patterns regarding the origin of the dominant narrative of Brighton as receptive, and the factors behind it. This discussion converged on diversity, but the two respondent groups attributed two different significances to this concept. Hence, I created the node 'diversity', which I subsequently divided into 'gender/sexuality' and

¹ I deliberately do not mention the names of the Council departments, charities or associations to respect my interviewees' preference.

² Although I am personally wary of the ethnic categories listed in the Census, I used them to ease the communication with the local government and reported them for coherence.

'ethnicity/race'. As explained further on, racism emerged as one of the consequences of the lack of ethnic diversity representation in town – to which I associated a separate node.

In social research, the effect of our positionality impacts on the data collection (Kobayashi 1994). I am a white European woman, in her late twenties at the time of fieldwork, fluent in English but not a native speaker. During fieldwork, nobody ever made direct remarks on my ethnicity, but my perception was that it facilitated me in establishing a good rapport with both respondent groups. When interviewing local politicians/policy-makers, being white in an almost exclusively white environment allowed me not to feel “out of place” (Puwar, 2004), while often members of BAMEs' associations pointed out our shared (albeit different) experience of migration³. Finally, time played a significant role in the data gathering: most of my interviews took place just after the 2015 Paris attacks, which had opened up new challenges for security and anti-terrorism, but also for anti-racism.

Narratives and diversity, narratives of diversity

Narratives originate from conversations, stories, and any other rhetorical device capable of creating meaning. Time is crucial to validate them, because “to know a place well requires long residence and deep involvement” (Tuan, 1975:164). Similarly, Stegner (1992:202) explains, “no place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history”. Since they construct meaning, narratives can provide a framework through which people can make sense of events or a justification for the adoption of certain political decisions (Boswell et al., 2011). Stokowski argues (2002:374) that narratives can “manipulate [the citizenry] towards desired (individual or collective) ends.” However, not every narrative has the power to do that. Jansson (2003) demonstrates that, for any place, there are dominant and oppositional narratives: the former is so because it is deemed to be the truth on the place it describes (Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates, 2001), which means it is not usually questioned, but also because it derives its strength from its authors' position of power (Stokowski, 2002). Fraser (1992) had previously defined the space of oppositional narratives as “counterpublic”, that is, a space that develops separately but parallel to the official discourse, “where

³ For reasons of coherence in the context of the wider research, I only interviewed people who had migrated to the UK during their life.

members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 123).

My research on Brighton revealed that diversity was central to the narratives of the city, albeit its framing differed according to the interviewees’ sample. With an analysis particularly suitable to the urban context, Berg and Sigona (2013) unpack diversity into three core meanings: social fact, policies, and narratives – in the following sections I will build on this distinction. The first construction addresses the demographic composition of the population, including ethnicity, age, gender, and all other dimensions relevant for an individual’s identity. The second understanding refers to “policies aimed at managing integration and fostering social cohesion” (Berg and Sigona, 2013:350). Thirdly, diversity can be “publicly celebrated like a marketable good” (Berg and Sigona, 2013:350). In this case, diversity achieves the status of a narrative, not only acquiring value as an asset *per se* but also as a symbol of the city’s self-representation, its economic competitiveness and its social performance (Hadj-Abdou, 2014).

I. Diversity in statistics and narratives

In her study on Dublin and Vienna, Hadj-Abdou (2014) uncovers how narratives of diversity do not necessarily reflect cities’ demographics. This is partially due to the very nature of the concept ‘diversity’, designed to include the numerous dimensions constitutive of someone’s identity. However, it is in this characteristic that lies its biggest flaw. Valverde (2012) defines diversity as a semantically flexible word, successful because it remains invariably attractive regardless of the contexts where it is applied or the groups that use it. Concerning my focus on ethnicity, the juxtaposition between the narratives by the representatives of the local government and local population statistics demonstrate that in Brighton too there is a mismatch between narratives and demographics.

Brighton is the 42nd most populous district in England (Office for National Statistics – ONS, 2018) with a population of 273,369 (BHCC, 2011⁴). Local government statistics (BHCC, 2014) classify its residents according to both world region of birth and ethnicity, showing that 16% of the local population were born outside the UK, and that Black and Asian Ethnic Minorities (BAMEs) represent 19.5% of residents. The Institute of Race Relations (2017) defines

⁴ The 2011 Census is still the most recent complete report on Brighton’s population. The next one will take place in 2021.

BAMEs as individuals whose ethnicity is recorded in the Census as other than 'White British'⁵. The 'Other White' is the most dominant among the local BAME groups (7.1%), followed by 'Asian/Asian British' (4.1%) and 'Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Group' (3.8%). Moreover, among the non-UK born population, Europeans constitute 50% of those arrived in Britain between 2001 and 2011 (BHCC, 2014:7). Brighton has never been an industrial centre, which concurs to explain the local demographics, and specifically the low rate of non-white nationals. In fact, the citizens of the British Empire who migrated to the UK generally settled in major industrial districts, such as Manchester or Birmingham (Open University, n.d.). The legacy of these movements is nowadays visible in the composition of their population: according to the latest Census, "the West Midlands had a higher than average percentage of minority ethnic groups: Pakistani at 4.1%, Indian at 3.9%, and Caribbean at 1.5%. It also had a lower than average White ethnic group at 82.7% and White British at 79.2%" (Office for National Statistics, 2012). In contrast, 86.7% of the South East population is classified as 'White British' and the 90.7% as 'White' (ONS, 2012).

The majority of politicians and policy-makers described the local community as "fairly cosmopolitan" [Respondent 7/institutions]. Yet, the more the interviewees were close to BAME individuals' lived experiences, either because of their role or for personal reasons, the more sceptical they were of the image of Brighton as ethnically diverse. Respondent 13/institutions, summarised it by stating:

"I think Brighton likes to think it's very welcoming; it's got this [...] self image. And I don't think people are aware of what goes on underneath, unless they're working directly with people who are affected. I know for a fact that landlords have said, 'we don't give accommodation to Muslims'".

The accounts of this group of respondents presented a contrast between those (the majority, and mostly in higher positions) who described the local community as "changing faster than anywhere in the country" [Respondent 7/institutions], "quite diverse" [Respondent 3/institutions] and a place where different communities live together in absence of segregation [Respondent 9/institutions], and those (much fewer, and working in services in close contact with BAME groups) who unpacked this statement. They explained that Brighton

⁵ The two definitions are not mutually exclusive: someone born outside the UK might be ethnically white British, while, analogously, members of different BAME groups can be (and mostly are) born in the UK.

has received various influxes of people from many different countries, but the overwhelming majority of them are European. Therefore, while it is true that they are classified as BAME, their whiteness conceals their ethnic diversity (Rzepnikowska, 2019). The visible make-up of the population remains, overall, “very white” [Respondent 8/institutions]. This diversity, although more visible from statistics than from looking at passers-by in the city centre, constituted a matter of pride for local politicians, echoing studies previously conducted on other “welcoming cities” (Almeida, 2019). In relation to this, I was reminded of what writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie masterfully argues: “diversity means different things to different folks. If a white person is saying a neighbourhood is diverse, they mean nine percent black people. [...] If a black person says diverse neighbourhood, they are thinking forty percent black.”

The more my questions narrowed down onto the origin of Brighton’s reputation as receptive, the more this appeared closely associated with gender and sexuality. Local politicians and policy-makers recounted how Brighton’s importance grew from the early 18th century, when the Prince Regent established it as the place of his escapades to the coast to enjoy a decadent lifestyle, bringing with him a lot of people “[whom] you would call open-minded [...] wild characters.” Among them were many artists, commonly associated with gays and lesbians. As time went on, not only the presence of LGBTQ+ got validated (Tuan, 1975), but also “other groups who don’t necessarily fit in a terribly clear Britishness [sic] as a whole found a home in Brighton” [Respondent 7/institutions]. The place’s reputation as party town gradually conflated into an idea of tolerance and openness. Several respondents pointed out how this image is actively promoted by the Council to attract businesses, tourists, and students. Hence, Brighton’s brands itself as a welcoming, open-minded, and artsy town, and most of the local discourse on openness speaks to gender identity, which “is very celebrated and it’s something that the city is proud of” [Respondent 2/institutions]. Some participants even explicitly distanced their understanding of diversity from ethnicity. For instance, Respondent 8/institutions, argued:

“[It] is not just about ethnicity, the diversity, is it? It’s accepting people who are different, you know, [...] for whatever reason. Whether they have a mental health problem, or they are very flamboyant in the way they dress, [...] or they identify as being transgender...”

Curiously, gender and ethnicity were never discussed in relation to the same individual⁶, as if the two dimensions could not overlap. I am not arguing this is the case; nonetheless it seems a point worth raising for the local analysis of diversity narratives.

The members of BAMEs' associations that took part in the study did not completely reject the dominant narrative; rather, they used it as a starting point to build their own. Drawing from their experiences, they provided a more measured picture of the city and its community. When covering Brighton's demographic composition, their point of view was remarkably distant from the institutional one (Almeida, 2016, 2019): these respondents were indeed much more moderate than local politicians/policy-makers in praising the diversity of the local population. While acknowledging the presence of several nationalities, they argued that this did not correspond to an ethnic diversity visible in terms of skin colour, religious symbols or traditional clothing (Amin 2010). The overwhelming majority of this interviewees' group admitted that Brighton residents are "very proud that [their city] is a diverse community" [Respondent 4/BAME], while simultaneously contesting the truthfulness of this assumption (see Almeida, 2019). Respondent 4/BAME, a man from Black/Caribbean background member of a mixed-heritage parents' group, explained that Brighton

"isn't [a diverse community]. There is 12% of the population that is non-white. And the biggest community is Chinese, but you don't see them. [...] There is a whole community of people from BME backgrounds who aren't visible".

Even more than lack of visible ethnic diversity, BAME participants stressed and criticised the selective understanding of diversity fostered by the institutional narrative, skewed towards gender and sexuality. They were supportive of the local freedom of expression of someone's own gender identity, but this did not override their resentment for the sidelining of ethnic diversity in dominant narratives. Respondent 6/BAME, a young man from an Arab background part of a religious association, explained that, "what people are used to [in Brighton] actually is [the] lesbian/gay scene", rather than a visible variety of ethnicities. An even more straightforward statement came from Respondent 4/BAME, who shared,

⁶ This is another reason why I did not include a discussion on intersectionality – although I acknowledge the relevance of it.

“[White British residents] think that, because they are walking through East Street amongst gay people, [...] they are very easy going. Because there is something about Brighton, you can *do what you like*⁷. Nobody really cares. It’s a lovely feeling, that’s why I live here. But we cannot forget the underlying feeling is abusive.”

By bringing ethnicity to the fore and speaking of it as a core component of the local sense of place (Massey, 1991), BAME interviewees turned the dominant narrative upside down. They demonstrated to be aware of the way its established understanding obfuscates certain dimensions of identity. The most politically engaged amongst them then connected this selective interpretation of diversity to discrimination, which I explore in the next sections.

II. Diversity within policies

The term ‘diversity’ entered the British political language in the 1990s and has, since then, been at the core of its policies (Tatli, 2011), especially after the publication of the 2010 Equality Act, introducing the “public sector equality duty” (Fredman, 2011). Coupled with ‘equality’, diversity is now considered a defining value in legislation, which public authorities and institutions alike have the duty to promote. At the local level, respecting this legislation means that Council services must be as open, accessible and fair to everyone as they can be, without any bias. Mirza (2005) suggests that the “bureaucratisation of diversity” caused lack of effectiveness of ‘equality and diversity’ policies: the time spent on enforcing diversity policies has been in fact gradually eroded and replaced with time spent filling in forms. Inspired by Strathern (2004), I locate this into the wider ‘audit culture’ of New Public Management, in which the performance of services and institutions is periodically reviewed in order to assess their efficiency. ‘Equality and diversity’ has slowly become an item on the audit list, which is why many institutions, including local governments, make it part of their vision.

To its credit, Brighton City Council has put in place a series of tools to ensure equality and diversity are respected. The ‘Equality’ section of the Council’s website reads: “we value [Brighton’s] diversity and aim to support and encourage it. We also take a leading role in seeking to increase equality, inclusion and fairness in the city.” Following, the Council lists the services in place to monitor and/or report discrimination. Acknowledging that groups can be

⁷ Interviewee’s emphasis

discriminated for a variety of biases, the Council includes services focusing on disability, ethnicity, religion, and gender. In addition, it provides information on equalities monitoring and assessments: in particular, the 2016 Re-accreditation for the Equality Framework for Local Government sheds light onto how local inclusion policies/services work. The report states that “there is strong political commitment to deliver the best for the local communities, and an understanding across all political parties that it is important to engage with, celebrate and deliver for BHCC’s diverse communities.” However, local government’s performances vary noticeably according to the sector. While actions in relation to gender equality are praised throughout the document, which states that “the strength of relations with the LGBTQI communities came through both with staff and community stakeholders”, this is not the case for the Council’s relations with BAME groups. In fact, “there was a feeling of cynicism and world weariness from BME communities. The team could find few significant examples where BAME groups were engaged with the Council on equality and diversity issues” (p. 5). Particularly relevant was an observation regarding ethnic diversity within the City Council itself: “there is knowledge that in the city, BME individuals are more highly educated than their white counterparts. However, this is not reflected in shortlisted candidates for jobs at BHCC. More interrogation of this data is required to ascertain what barriers may exist, for example, there are several different templates being used for job descriptions, which can be confusing” (p.7).

As Newkirk (2019) highlights, public policies alone do not suffice to achieve social reform; rather they must be complemented by the moral imperative to create a more inclusive society – which narratives have the power to transmit. Brighton’s policy structure is well developed, but the selective focus on gender identity (albeit undoubtedly positive in and of itself) risks to obfuscate the need to intervene in other realms. This framing of diversity heavily focused on local “success stories” (Prasad and Mills, 1997) produces consequences: in the following section I discuss those related to ethnic diversity’s lack of representation.

III. The consequences of a selective framing of diversity

Racism emerged from my data collection as connected to Brighton’s selective understanding of diversity. Amongst the BAME respondents’ group, a couple of participants were noticeably more straightforward than the others in their accounts, sharing direct and indirect experiences

of discrimination and criticising some of the Council's actions. They belonged to the same ethnic group, which might result in an unplanned slightly skewed perspective. However, they were also very politically active, and thus very aware of policy-related dynamics. In addition, one of them explicitly mentioned that Asian groups share the discrimination black people encounter in Brighton but, according to him, they are generally less vocal about it to avoid possible repercussions.

When directly asked about ethnic diversity in the city and possible issues related to intercultural coexistence, most representatives of the local government portrayed the positive picture of a town where different communities get on well with each other, especially if compared to other cities along the South coast. As for the data reported in section I, this perspective shifted towards more critical positions the closer the interviewees worked or interacted with BAME groups. For instance, Respondent 4/institutions reflected on hate incidents generally being underreported, which makes it very difficult to evaluate their real frequency. This participant problematised the public image of Brighton as a tolerant town, arguing that:

“I don't think [receptiveness] has been tested, because Brighton is so white. [...] There are a lot of issues having to do with race that it doesn't actually have to confront.”

Two more policy-makers working with BAME groups made similar statements, such as that racism is “affecting families and children's wellbeing everyday” [Respondent 2/institutions]. An interesting account came from a Councillor who reflected on what he learnt during his years in the local government:

“I was born in Brighton and I've always considered it to be an excepting kind of a place, but there's quite a lot of racism that takes place among people in the city.”

Most participants within this group preferred discussing hate crime, which they primarily associated to gender identity and sexuality. Respondent 7/institutions described local hate crime as “directed mostly against members of the LGBT community” and committed “mostly by outsiders”, while Respondent 6/institutions argued:

“With the big LGBT population here in the city, hate crime is very much directed on that, so the work is to tackle homophobic hate crime.”

The Metropolitan Police defines hate crime as “when someone commits a crime against you because of your disability, gender identity, race, sexual orientation, religion, or any other perceived difference” (Metropolitan Police, n.d.). Despite the undoubted importance of recognising all the range of biases behind an attack, hate crime has been criticised by some scholars because of its capability to obscure racism. Bell (2014:368) refers to its “obscuring lens”, warning that the use of this umbrella-term can undermine a thorough analysis of racism. It is possible to gauge some parallels between ‘hate crime’ and ‘diversity’: both are broad terms including a variety of elements, but also have the potential of hiding those very components (see Michaels, 2016).

And indeed, racism and hate crime are not the same. Racism is a structure of domination based on an essentialist conception of race (Omi and Winant 1994). Over time, it has manifested in multiple ways (Gilroy, 1987[1992]), although always acting as an organising social principle grounded on markers of racial difference. For a long time – and still to this very day – the public perception has connected race to immigration (Anderson, 2012; Blinder, 2015), referring to the racialised subjects of the British Empire who, from the end of WWII, moved to the UK from South Asia and the Caribbeans. The socio-political consequences of how politicians of the time framed this migration and its protagonists are still visible in current British society, not only in scandals such as the attempted deportation of the Windrush generation, but also in a failure all across the political spectrum to understand that “many Black and Minority Ethnic inhabitants are – and always have been – citizens” (Bhambra, 2018). British legislation has effectively been racialising certain subjects for decades, establishing a hierarchy of who belongs to the nation (Hall, 1993, 2017; Gilroy, 1987[1992]).

Members of BAMEs’ associations felt that the mainstream narrative of the city provided a partial perception of the issues affecting it, rightfully raising awareness on discrimination or hate crime when based on gender identity and sexuality, but overlooking racism’s incidence. Racism as experienced ‘on the ground’ ranges from pre-assumptions and stereotyping to verbal harassment and overt physical violence. Despite its various forms, racist abuse always targets those “representatives of minority communities based on phenotypical characteristics, or on religious, national or cultural origins” (Björgero and Witte, 1993:6). BAMEs participants reported low rates of racist attacks on the ground. Comparing Brighton to other cities in

Britain, they convened that it is a town where the likelihood of getting racially assaulted is low. For instance, Respondent 4/BAME shared that, while in his youth he used to be attacked on the streets of London, now “I cannot remember the last fight I had with a racist. And it wasn’t in Brighton”. However, he continued, current times are “safer, but psychologically less safe because of the assumption that we are safe”, implying that overlooking the effects of race prevents the possibility of seriously tackling racism (Lentin, 2016). As much as race is a social construct, the consequences of self-identification along this line and its following discriminations are real (Hirsch, 2018:24). Gilroy (1987[1992]:xvii) problematises how “though things have changed *around*¹ British racism, the sad sources, unhappy contents and depressing vehicles of that racism have not altered beyond recognition.” Referring to contemporary Britain, Hirsch (2018:25) argues that the progress made by society “is, in some ways, part of the problem”. Comparing current racist abuse to what black and Asian people used to go through in past decades can give us the soothing illusion that we are passed racism. Slipping into this trap, claiming not to see race, prevents regular citizens and politicians alike from effectively analysing the issue (Hall, 2017:96; Hirsch, 2018:26).

Other BAME respondents said they feel safe in Brighton – but added some caveats. For instance, Respondent 6/BAME claimed never to have experienced what he called “obvious racism” but he also clarified that “I generally dress quite restrained...and my English is good.” He concluded that, in his opinion, experiencing racism “depends on how different you look.” Respondent 5/BAME, also a young man of Arab background, mentioned that, even if in Brighton he had never suffered from “major problems”, “being from the Muslim community is always...When there is something in the news, like [...] these atrocities in Paris [*the 2015 Paris attacks*], then always people give you a second glance, a second look.”

Even if rarely, racist harassment still does take place in Brighton. Yet, the BAME participants who shared stories on this, also pointed out the widespread tendency of the police to frame racist attacks as individual acts rather than systemic injustices (Erel, Murji and Nahaboo 2016). Respondent 2/BAME reported the case of a girl he knew, defined as mixed-race, who had been object of racial slurs in central Brighton. When they reported it to a policeman, the officer dismissed the incident suggesting that the offender was just intoxicated. This episode was not unique, but rather in line with the Police’s tendency of either downplaying the severity

of the incidents or stating that they do not have the necessary resources to follow up on reports of racist abuse, which “are just overwhelming [their forces]” [Respondent 4/BAME]. Representatives of the local government and members of BAMEs’ associations alike acknowledged that Brighton’s City Council has the necessary services in place for victims of abuse to report it, but BAMEs complained these reports would rarely achieve tangible results.

Respondent 13/institutions summarised her perception on racism in Brighton by saying:

“I’ve been here three and a half years and no one has told me that they’ve been a victim of hate-crime. [...] But I do hear of histories of racism in housing, landlord refusing accommodation, that kind of thing...”

In fact, interviewees from both groups agreed on describing racism in Brighton more as institutional than as harassment. The term ‘institutional racism’ was coined at the end of the 1960s in the US context (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967[1992]) but became widely known to the British public in the aftermath of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, in 1993. The 1998 MacPherson’s report on the Metropolitan Police Service investigation concluded that the police force was ‘institutionally racist’ for the bias with which they handled the inquiry. The report defined institutional racism as

“the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin” (Cook and Stone, 1999).

Those who openly discussed this topic⁸ reported to have experienced institutional racism across several realms, from school, to the work environment, to the job market or in their relations with public services (Sivanandan, 2000). By means of example, one respondent told me that, when speaking on the phone, many recruiters are likely to lie on the availability of a position depending on the accent of the candidate – privileging European-sounding, and therefore most likely white, applicants. The literature has documented similar cases, identifying a correlation between “visible difference” and the attainment of low-skilled jobs (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2007). Other work-related examples concern the public sector. For instance, Respondent 2/BAME reported the experience of an acquaintance of his, a black

⁸ A couple of respondents omitted comments on racism and discrimination, both when talking freely and when I prompted them.

woman working as civil servant, who had not been promoted for nine years despite her experience. When she approached her line manager enquiring why she had not advanced as her white colleagues, she was not given a satisfactory explanation. My interviewee was completely confident that the only reason for this differential treatment lied in the lady's skin colour:

“Caterina: How do they justify that [the lack of promotion to the woman]?”

Respondent 2/BAME: Err, easily. She's black. [...] They wouldn't say it but we know, she knows and her husband, who's white, knows...”

Schools too emerged as an environment prone to discrimination, although just a couple of participants with grandchildren mentioned them. They narrated episodes of bullying and name-calling, which would be too simplistic to dismiss as childish pranks. As Respondent 4/institutions reminded,

“you can't take a racist incident in isolation, because it has come with a lot of history...And I think also, I think hate incidence can have [...] an effect on the whole community.”

These results are in line with studies on BAMEs in the British education and higher education sectors. For example, Arday's (2017) research demonstrates that it is not overt racism that prejudices BAMEs' studies and/or work experiences in academia, but rather subtle behaviours by white counterparts, which make them feel “out of place” (Puwar, 2004). Social psychology literature on implicit bias (Greenwald et al., 2002) also explains how mental associations on a particular group can easily give rise to stereotyping and racist behaviours.

Finally, the relations between grassroots BAMEs' associations and the local government were often described as complicated. All interviewees acknowledged that Brighton and Hove City Council can count on committed members of staff who work to make the city worth of its reputation – as also mentioned in the 2016 Re-accreditation for the Equality Framework for Local Government. Yet, they sounded dubious this was enough to have a real impact on policies. For example, Respondent 4/BAME complained about the Council's work on social inclusion, arguing that local government representatives are aware of the deprivation many BAME communities face but do not tackle it proactively, for instance by sharing the results of

their surveys with the wider community. A couple of respondents referred to the way local institutions approach multiculturalism as “tick-boxing”. In their words, several local politicians care about maintaining the façade of peaceful coexistence between different communities Brighton is famous for; yet, they do not take political action to address existing inequalities. This remark echoed Mirza’s study (2005) and its identification of bureaucracy as the most common obstacle to ‘doing diversity’.

As a last remark, it is worth pointing out that several BAME participants reclaimed the word ‘multiculturalism’, using it in their accounts much more often than ‘diversity’. What in the late 1980s and 1990s was known as ‘multicultural policies’ has been gradually transformed into ‘diversity policies’. Saeys et al. (2019) reveal how this transition has achieved questionable results, especially because of the depoliticising nature of the diversity discourse:

“Whereas multiculturalism defended group rights, diversity policies rather focus on the insertion of individuals into mainstream society, serving a neo-assimilationist agenda that has come to replace the forms of minority representation and recognition typical of the multicultural approach” (Saeys et al. 2019:251).

Inspired by Benschop (2001), I suggest ‘multiculturalism’, although not flawless, remains a term that points at social injustices more directly than ‘diversity’; plus, crucially for this study, ‘multiculturalism’ speaks directly to injustices to do with race and ethnicity.

Conclusion

Relying on interviews to representatives of the local government and members of grassroots BAMEs’ associations, this article has explored whether Brighton’s dominant narrative of diversity reflects the multiplicity of identity dimensions it should include. This proved not to be the case, so I focused onto the local significance of ‘diversity’. After this, I considered the impact of these narratives on the policy realm and, ultimately, onto people’s life. I focused onto ethnicity and race, deliberately excluding other dimensions: concentrating on them, I could gauge whether the mainstream narrative overlooked them and how BAME themselves see the local diversity discourse and practice.

The representatives of the local government, whose narrative of Brighton has become dominant, described their city as home to a cosmopolitan community, arguing that this

diversity lies at the core of Brighton's openness. Yet, the few respondents in this group working in close contact with BAME communities had a more nuanced view on this point: they clarified that, although a wide array of nationalities is represented in Brighton, most of the non-'White British' residents are classified as 'Other White' groups. The ethnic diversity of the population is certainly not visible at a glance. In addition, when I deepened onto the meaning of 'diversity' in the city, the vast majority of the institutional respondents stressed the long-term presence of LGBTQ+ groups in the city and the local openness to a free expression of gender identity. By contrast, BAME participants – although welcoming Brightonians' receptiveness of diversity of gender and sexuality – reclaimed the relevance of ethnic diversity, criticising their local lack of visibility and, in turn, of their political representation in the Council.

I then shifted my focus onto the narratives of diversity's effects. In fact, narratives provide people with a specific understanding of a community, what the issues affecting it are, and which action is needed to tackle them (Johnstone, 1990). The data collected showed that Brighton's selective understanding of diversity as gender identity permeates the policy realm and influences the way hate crime is understood. The 2016 Re-accreditation for the Equality Framework for Local Government highlights the difference between the Council's strong link with the LGBTQ+ community and its poor relations with BAMEs. Most of the representatives of the local government (especially those in high positions, with less contact with BAME groups) discussed hate crime in relation to attacks against LGBTQ+. Instead, both policy-makers close to BAME groups and the most politically engaged amongst BAME respondents openly addressed racism, which the umbrella-term 'hate crime' can sometimes obfuscate (Bell, 2014). They did not refer to abuse, which rarely takes place in the city, as much as to the institutional racism embedded in the local job market and services, including the very local government. Although acknowledging that, overall, many BAME individuals find Brighton more open than many other British towns, and that the Council includes some representatives genuinely committed to equality, these respondents' accounts uncovered an important gap between narratives and lived experiences.

This study does neither serve just to uncover the mismatch between narrative and reality (Hadj-Abdou, 2014), nor to demonstrate that diversity conceals a number of specific struggles

(Benschop, 2001; Ahmed, 2009). Rather, building on this knowledge, it contributes to the diversity literature by demonstrating that one successful dimension of it can easily overtake the others, obfuscating their presence but also, and even more so, the issues connected to them. The prevalence of gender identity over racism in the institutional perception is an excellent example. Brighton's long-term spotlight on gender and sexuality comes from them being a "success story" (Prasad and Mills, 1997) in the local environment. Concentrating on a success is an easy yet effective way in which diversity can mislead into thinking that we "have solved it" (Ahmed, 2009) – but this leaves out of the picture other realms in which people are still struggling.

This study can open up new interesting avenues for research: more 'success stories' could be investigated to identify if and how they sideline other problematic dimensions. In addition, this type of investigation could be transposed to the national level to unpack the multiple struggles lying behind the diverse and tolerant image (Kundhani, 2000; Goodfellow, 2019) the British establishment has of itself.

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