Taking stock of diversity

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TAKING STOCK OF DIVERSITY

Since the 20th century, migration has mainly been considered as something to do with black and brown people coming into Britain. In the post-war period this was dominated by so-called New Commonwealth immigration; current debates around the usefulness of the term BAME reflect the feeling that identifying and grouping all these diverse people into one broad category has been and continues to be a problem, not least because of variety and change within these populations

The perception that Britain is experiencing increasing ever greater demographic complexity has become a truism in social policy as well as in public debates. Whatever field of policy this is linked to—health and social care, families or social security, for instance—the variety and changing patterns of social groups and identities present severe challenges to the delivery of public services (Platt and Nandi, 2018), particularly where they aim to meet the needs of diverse groups equitably. These changes are evident across all demographics and characteristics, such as gender and age, but my own interest is in how this is thought about with regard to race, ethnicity and migration.

The convulsions around Brexit shone fresh light on migration in the UK, with its focus on predominantly white European migrants. However, over the centuries, there have been waves of white migrants, often received with some hostility, and a recent book on London, *Migrant City* (Panayi, 2021) sets out this history in an engaging manner. Since the 20th century, migration has mainly been considered as something to do with black and brown people coming into Britain. In the post-war period this was dominated by so-called New Commonwealth immigration; current debates (e.g., see CRED, 2021) around the usefulness of the term BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) reflect the feeling that identifying and grouping all these diverse people into one broad category has been and continues to be a problem, not least because of variety and change within these populations. The change is also terminological, as over the decades, they have been called many things in policy terms, including 'coloured', Black, Asian, ethnic minorities, and BME/BAME. Yet, as these groups have made Britain their home, other terms and ideas – such as mixed race – have also become evident, reflecting social change. This short article presents four major approaches in the social policy literature to thinking about this racial/ethnic complexity. For each of them, I sketch its main claim, what is known about it based on applied research, and some reflections on what it could mean for social policy, in efforts to improve Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI).

Superdiversity

This term emerged from Vertovec's (2007) observation regarding UK migrant communities as smaller, more scattered, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified than was recognised through a concentration on racial minorities and catch-all categories such as BME. Rather than viewing diversity mainly in terms of ethnicity or country of origin, the fact of superdiversity, Vertovec maintains, means that policymakers should recognise the 'multiple identifications and axes of differentiation, only some of which concern ethnicity' (Vertovec, 2007, p.1049). There are relatively few examples of empirical research directly examining the implications of superdiversity for addressing race inequalities in social policy, although it is used frequently in migration studies. Among them are Phillimore's (2014) work on the need for different policy approaches to monitoring and managing complexity in health services due to new migrant groups, as professionals encounter service users with new cultural and linguistic needs. In turn, these groups may have differing expectations of how to access services based on their countries of origin. Overall though, the implications of superdiversity for social policy are still underdeveloped.

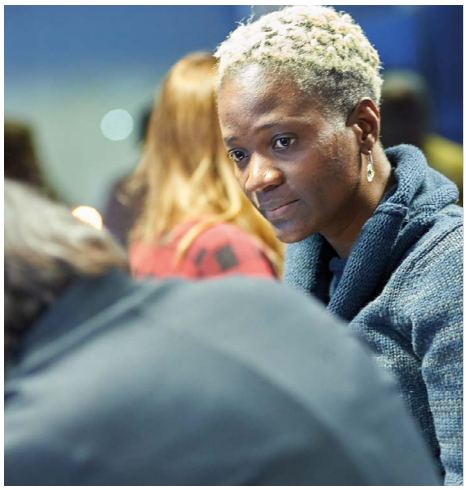
An analysis of what is lacking in service delivery and how 'different' or similar the needs of communities are remains at issue. While Vertovec (2007) called for a substantial shift in the assessment of needs, planning, budgeting and commissioning of services, there has been little progress on what these new forms of administrative data collection might look like in practice. More importantly, what will this new information help to achieve? How should it be used? It is here that more research is required in order to understand what, if anything, superdiversity (understood both as a concept and as a method) can contribute, in practical terms, to our understanding of the utility of ethnic and racial categories in promoting equality in public policy and public service provision. The work to date has not offered practitioners and policy makers a clear direction, other than to describe demographic complexity with a greater degree of sensitivity and granularity, and why it would produce better outcomes.

There is a need to explore, in more empirical detail, the nature of underlying beliefs and choices that policymakers, social scientists, and mixed people make in using the idea of 'mixed'.

Mixedness

Sociological studies of mixedness offer a theoretical account of the boundaries of identity associated with race and ethnicity, by considering the significance of 'mixed' and 'inter' racial and ethnic backgrounds, as both a global as well as a national issue (King O'Riain *et al*., 2014). The main policy implications arise from demographic analysis: in 2001 (the first time the UK census included categories for people from mixed heritage backgrounds) 677,000 people in Britain identified themselves as 'mixed'. Just less than half were under the age of 16 and the mixed category looks set to become one of the fastest growing ethnic populations, as will become evident when the 2021 Census data is available. The feeling that mixedness requires attention by policy makers has been around for some time, with a common view that the sheer diversity of mixed people's combinations and experiences is insufficiently understood. There is a risk that assumptions are made about what being 'mixed' means, as a simplistic 'between two cultures' understanding of experiences.

It is evident that a substantial proportion of people with mixed parentage choose not to describe themselves as 'mixed' when filling out social surveys. For mixed heritage children in foster care, categorisation is often inadequate and fails to consider internal variation between identities that are formed outside birth families, and the ethnic and racial categories of birth. If mixedness is to be used as a framework to determine the public service needs of the population in the future through a more granular analysis of service outcomes, then understanding the factors that shape decisions to identify oneself as 'mixed' will be an important line of inquiry for policy makers. In particular, there is a need to explore, in more empirical detail, the nature of underlying beliefs and choices that policymakers, social scientists, and mixed people make in using the idea of 'mixed'. How do existing patterns of racialisation and structural inequality shape the process of defining and responding to the public services needs of certain parts of the population? How do these beliefs apply to decisions about administrative categories employed by public authorities in order to monitor difference? Mixedness would also require a more intersectional approach to racial identities (acknowledging the social construction of race in conjunction with other aspects of identity such as gender and class) and while this is apparent in youth and cultural studies, its implications for and in social policy to address race inequality are still much less understood.



Post-race. This has several meanings that are often confused. The more common manner in which it is employed is a descriptor of ethnic/racial diversity and the need to go beyond race

Intersectionality

This term has only been used in the UK social policy lexicon in recent years, where it has been associated mainly with specialist equality issues and legal matters (Atrey, 2018) where one form of discrimination is 'added' to another. Although this additive approach is weak, the term has also been employed in a more critical vein, as a dynamic alternative to equality approaches based on more static, one-dimensional forms of identity and inequality such as race/ethnicity, age or sexual orientation. Despite providing a nod to complexity and intersectionality, policy makers often continue to treat gender, ethnicity and disability as separate processes and inequalities. Hence, it can be argued that the concept has been denuded of its radical edge. Authors note that the UK has been slow to embrace the application of intersectionality in women's rights movements and that it has revealed differences of approach within feminist movements (Christofferson, 2020).

There appear to be continued conceptual and practical barriers to the application of intersectionality in policy and practice. It currently has only limited application in UK policy and is more often found in international development policy. The term is used descriptively rather than critically, and even then, is seen as requiring a relatively high level of investment of time and resources to work at the required level of granularity—understanding the complex relationships between gender, race and class for instance. Despite widespread recognition of the need to understand the intersectional identities and experiences of those using public services, the practice of public services delivery has not caught up with how to address these multidimensional aspects of inequality.

Post-race

This has several meanings that are often confused. The more common manner in which it is employed is a descriptor of ethnic/racial diversity and the need to go beyond race. In common with the above approaches, the view is that racial categories and terms such as BME do not helpfully capture experiences of inequality and discrimination in contemporary society. Alternative post-racial arguments draw on ethical propositions relating to questions of social justice. This 'eliminativist' perspective maintains that, even though racism has not been overcome, removing race from political discourse and scholarly inquiry is needed due to the negative, reifying effects that arise from its use (St Louis, 2015). Thus, the term covers a variety of views – a move beyond race-based/identitarian politics; and also as a critique of 'race blind' viewpoints, that deny race and racism as an issue for political and policy attention It is the former 'beyond race' aspect that is most common and this was evident in the recent government-commissioned Sewell report (CRED, 2021). It has echoes in public discussions too, as in a 2015 Channel 4 documentary *Things we won't say about race that are true*. There the presenter, Trevor Phillips, stated that actions on race equality under the banner of 'multiculturalism' had actually been counter-productive for both racial minorities who had been 'ghettoised', and white communities who had been alienated by 'political correctness' and special treatment for non-whites.

What are the implications of post-race for policy and practice? A reluctance or refusal to count by race makes counting ethnic inequalities a particular challenge in Europe (Simon, 2017). From a UK perspective, the racialisation of groups and associated race inequalities problematise the adoption of race-blind forms of equality policy frameworks. Contemporary arguments about sovereignty vs. security, as in the UK Brexit debates, or about the alleged cultural incompatibility of Islam reveal the intersections of racism, nationalism and populism with migration issues and religious minorities. This supports arguments that race categories and identities are still needed, given the fact that racial inequalities remain so clearly evident across a range of policy fields (Race Disparity Unit, 2020; Byrne *et al.*, 2020). Thus, a key challenge in this area is about identifying a balance between acknowledging that race categories and terms are imperfect and heuristic, while at the same time resisting the element in post-racial views that deny racism or limits it to the past or an extreme fringe.

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Conclusion

There are several conclusions to be drawn from this article. For one, there are a range of approaches to thinking about diversity beyond race or using terms and categories such as BME. The four discussed here are useful in telling us something about social and demographic change and complexity. They are better seen as overlapping, rather than being wholly distinct, but they remain at quite different levels conceptually and empirically, with post-race and superdiversity stressing more than race is no longer a useful category, while mixedness and intersectionality tend to call for a more granular and complex view of how race works alongside other identities. Second, despite a great deal of academic and public talk about social change, due to race and migration as well as other factors, applying alternative or additive models to actual policy studies and outcomes is patchy, and it is not easy to prescribe a list of changes that derives from advocating alterative terms and models. This makes it difficult to compare and assess them. Third, the impact of Black Lives Matter in the past two years has seen the issue of structural racism come to the fore (Murji, 2019). This indicates that the approaches here do not replace race as wished for in claims for some of them, and, whatever the arguments against a category such as BME, it or something like it will still be needed to act as a baseline against which to assess whether policy is delivering more equitable outcomes. Hence, and finally, in a context such as Higher Education, producing better EDI will need to find a way of taking account of race as well as (and is not replaceable by) other models.

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