

The Framing of Diversity & Equality: Consensus & Tensions

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Introduction

In diverse societies, community cohesion and well-being are increasingly critical to sustainable and inclusive communities. One aspect of community cohesion is the degree to which communities are able to engage with and benefit from diverse constituencies. Community and voluntary organizations, as well as public sector authorities, are strategically positioned to play a role in fostering effective interactions among diverse constituents in communities.

However, examining how such organizations “manage” diversity and how they meet the diversity challenges in their communities may be putting the proverbial cart before the horse. This is because there is no consistency in how diversity is understood by individuals, even by those working directly with diversity remits. In effect, much of the scholarly discussion around diversity fails to illuminate the conflicting assumptions underlying the concept as it is used in practice. Noon (2007) discusses what he calls the “fatal flaws” of the diversity concept which in his view “marginalizes the importance of equality” and suppresses the legitimacy of social justice arguments, as well as misplaces the emphasis on the individual relative to the group in the case of ethnic diversity. Others have also critiqued the diversity management concept and traced the ‘turns’ in its evolution (cf. Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000).

This exploratory qualitative study aims to better understand how individuals in community, voluntary and public sector organizations understand diversity and equality. While the term “framing” that appears in the title of this paper usually refers to a particular aspect of communication in the academic literature, here is meant to refer to how individuals understand the concepts. Based upon 16 interviews in an ongoing field study with individuals working in these organizations in Oxford and London, the key themes revealed in this preliminary analysis suggest considerable tensions between the way in which individuals define ‘diversity’ and ‘equality’ when asked directly, and what their broader discussion on the topics reveal. There also appear to be notable differences in terms of how participants see the relationship between equality and diversity.

In terms of their stated definitions of diversity, a common theme appears to be recognizing, accepting, respecting, and/or understanding differences. This understanding

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was widely shared across participants. However, deeper analysis of interview data suggests several underlying tensions around how individuals understand diversity, exemplified by the following dualities: inclusion/exclusion, urban /rural, and visibility/invisibility.

As for equality, one important difference has to do with what participants thought that “equality” actually referred to: equality of opportunity (access) or equality of outcomes? Further, they exhibited various views on the relationship between diversity and equality. Some believe that equality is the basic foundation that must be in place before organizations and society can benefit from diversity. Others believe that the two work together, in parallel.

Another theme relating to both equality and diversity was fear/reluctance. According to some participants, the fear occurs among white middle class British who are afraid of being stigmatized as being racist by expressing a particular view or by saying the ‘wrong’ thing about blacks and/or minority ethnic group members, while the reluctance occurs among many minority ethnic group members to participate in ‘the system’ (health care, political, etc.), which is not only a detriment to themselves but also to community well-being.

This paper is an attempt to expose some of these tensions which will serve to benefit voluntary organizations seeking to make a positive difference in community cohesion.

Methodology

The preliminary, exploratory analysis is based upon interviews of 16 participants in Oxford and London. Respondents reflect various job roles, including equality & diversity officers, organizational directors, administrators, academics, and community leaders. This sample includes individuals working in nonprofit/voluntary sector organizations [9], community organizations [1], and public sector offices [6]. Thus far, the voluntary sector participants in this study include three individuals from voluntary organizations and six from Oxford University.² There were three men and 13 women included at this stage of the study. The representation of women is greater in part because of the “snowball” sampling technique that was used, which resulted in a several women from the university’s Springboard program participating. The ethnic/racial/cultural background of the participants was derived from how the person may have self-identified during the interview—they were not asked directly. On this basis, seven interviewees were Black (of African or African Caribbean descent), six were white, and three were either dual or mixed heritage. Additional data on individuals’ definitions of diversity were provided in an OREC/NCVO community forum on diversity which was held in Oxford in Spring 2009. As some interviewees for this study may have also participated in that forum, the forum data are used tentatively here.

² The ONS states that the UK National Accounts classifies higher education (private) institutions as nonprofit sector organizations.

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/user-guidance/lm-guide/concepts/employers/jobs/pub-and-priv/index.html>

Themes are developed from the data which will ultimately inform grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The complete set of interviews will be analyzed more in-depth using open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to provide a more nuanced understanding of the data. However, for this paper, a summary of answers to key questions, as well as of subthemes therein, were compiled.

The preliminary themes revealed here suggest considerable tensions between individuals' stated definitions of 'diversity' and 'equality' and the underlying premises that were surfaced in discussions of those definitions. Furthermore, participants' provided divergent views of the relationship between equality and diversity. These are discussed in the following sections, with representative quotes highlighted.

Views of Diversity

[Diversity issues] are unwritten and deep “out there”—you can't pin it down; can't put your hands on it but it is so thick, real & visible. [5]

The above quote aptly reflects the experiences of many people, particularly those from groups classified as Black, Asian and “minority ethnic.” The interviewee is referring to the complexity of diversity issues in British³ society. While diversity has been recognized as critical to society (Parekh, 2000) and while British organizations are replete with lengthy and well-crafted diversity policies, there is still much diversity in the way that people think about diversity.

In terms of interviewees' stated definitions of diversity, a common theme appears to be *recognizing, accepting, respecting, understanding differences, and allowing people to 'be who they are.'* This understanding was widely shared across participants. Yet a deeper analysis of the interview data suggests *several underlying tensions around how individuals understand diversity, exemplified by the following dualities: inclusion/exclusion, urban /rural, and visibility/invisibility.* Each of these is discussed in turn below.

Inclusion/Exclusion

This theme centered on who is included or excluded when defining 'diversity.' So despite diversity's denotative meaning reflecting wide inclusion of everyone, its connotation for many individuals was narrowed, as they reflected upon various identity groups in society.

One university administrator who works to recruit undergraduates to Oxford says that diversity is about the fact that anyone who wants to go to Oxford can, as long as they have the skills. She went on to define diversity:

³ The author is sufficiently sensitized to the ongoing debate around Britishness, nationality and diversity. To the extent that the diversity and equality issues discussed here are relevant to England, Scotland, and Wales, the term British will be used to refer to society as a whole. However, the interviews were conducted in England.

I don't see diversity as diversity, if that makes sense. [Where I am from] everyone is the same—we have a mix of races, culture, gender, age, et cetera and this [mixture] –it's not out of place there...it's normal. Diversity here tends to mean 'different.' [7]

But the same interviewee says later:

It's also about different interests. For example you will see someone with purple hair, [or]...a tongue piercing; the university isn't against that [so by extension, they are accepting of differences, she is implying]. Diversity means inclusive. [7]

In other words, diversity is exclusive on the one hand, and inclusive on the other.

When discussing identity terminology, there was not much consensus at all and reflections indicated more exclusion than inclusion. For example, one interviewee (Black) gave an example of being called to task by a colleague for using the “BME” term. She said that she uses the term but seemed to understand why people [Blacks] question it, and explained that, for example, while Poles may be economically disadvantaged, they are not a [visible] minority. Blacks are classified as a minority but it is based on color [rather than on economics]. What makes someone a ‘minority’? (Many interviewees implied that visible minorities face a qualitatively different experience than do the economically disadvantaged who are not visible minorities.)

There was much disagreement among the responses about how people understood the terminology that reflects so-called “minority” groups—e.g., BME, BAME, BAMER. In the health field, this same interviewee said that they use the term “vulnerable” groups. She went on to say that other terms can have a negative connotation, suggesting a “lack” of something—for example, “hard to reach,” “disadvantaged,” “target” groups. They all imply that one has to go the ‘extra mile’ to reach (service) them. “So why not give them on a plate rather than struggle [with them]?” [3] She states that the NHS attempts to be “color-blind”— she says that one looks at what can be delivered in terms of care.

Another interview discussed it this way:

‘People accept and recognize BAME. “Ethnic” feels like a pejorative term [like one is referring to a rug]. I would prefer a different term. “People of color” doesn't go down well, either. Within the academic administration, BAME refers to anyone who is not white (so not Europeans, Brits, Irish). It sometimes includes gypsies/travelers. “Ethnic minority” does not equal “disadvantaged”—many white working class kids are disadvantaged. The latter term infers “poor”—living in council housing, a child “in care,” et cetera. Afro Caribbeans are disadvantaged because they are picked on.’ [4]

Another participant, who works in the voluntary sector, agreed that the way she uses diversity is very broad—“it means ‘a space for everybody to do their thing.’” But on the other hand, she suggests that the term diversity is “used almost synonymous with ‘at

risk of exclusion,’ ‘hard to reach’—all of those complex and slightly patronizing types of words that people use” [1]:

“When I hear BME, I think of people of all different ethnicities, aware that there is a bit of question mark over our eastern European migrant communities who often have some of the same problems, if you like, in terms of interfacing with British society; but actually if you are Polish you are not really of a different ethnicity, so there is something slightly awkward about including Poles, Slovaks and Czechs into the BME; people do it, but if you were going to be slightly pedantic about it, you’d say, ‘hang on a minute..’” ‘Black’ is another one, isn’t it? I mean how many communities count themselves as ‘black’ rather than [by] some other definition? It’s a minefield... [1]

So the extent to which terms such as ‘BME’ are essentially understood to mean ‘not white, middle class, British’ then it is difficult to see how this accords with stated definitions of diversity wherein all differences are accepted, recognized and valued. (One note here is that no interviewee defined diversity explicitly in terms of the *equal* valuing of said differences, but rather this equality appeared to be implicit.) While reflection on terminology was initially prompted by the interviewer, discussion about this terminology eventually provided *a sense that diversity is about ‘difference.’ But rather than being about different equally valued aspects among various groups, it appears to be more about difference from the ‘mainstream’ group—white, middle class, British.* So, it is the “minority” groups who are “different.”

To some interviewees, however, the ‘BME’ and related terms were unknown:

BME, BAME are not well known terms in the public at large...[8]

I’ve never heard of these terms—BAME, etc. [9]

This last quote above is by a university administrator who thinks that using the terms “black” or “ethnic” implies that someone needs pity; that they are not good enough; or that they need more help. But, she acknowledges, “people have their own agendas” with regard to their preference for particular terminology. She also questions what ethnicity means: “It used to be Indians but now it is Polish (or eastern European)...” When asked what terminology she finds prevalent at the University, she says that “equality is one of the words used” University but that she “never see[s] events at the university about equality and diversity... never see[s] cultural events advertised... They don’t ‘flag’ it or endorse it.” She felt that the University could do more and that it is “out of sync with the times.” [9] Another university administrator prefers/recognizes the term ‘socially disadvantaged,’ as it includes whites as well as ethnic minorities, and because it is about the background that they are from. [7] One faculty member said that she thought that diversity at the university meant counting the number of BME staff—that it is more about recruitment.

Among the university respondents, gender diversity was more salient as many of them had participated in the Springboard career development program. When asked if they thought that gender aspects of diversity differed from race or ethnic ones, a few said no—they thought the issues were similar, regardless of the group characteristic.

What we can take away from the foregoing discussion is that people hold implicit understandings which may vary more than their explicit ones. While usage (or not) of various identity group terminology does not necessarily contradict stated definitions of diversity, it is clear that in talking about “difference” people need ways of effectively describing dimensions of difference that matter, in their view. There would appear to be a degree of dissatisfaction on this front. Describing diversity differences as diverging from a presumed norm runs counter to explicit understandings of diversity, which were largely shared among interviewees.

Urban/Rural

Another aspect of inclusion/exclusion is the urban/rural distinction as it relates to diversity. As one interviewee (nonprofit) indicated, a large portion of England is rural and poor, and thus he asks, “are they [the rural poor] included in ‘diversity’?” [16] Another voluntary sector interviewee stated:

But also you will get [a] vocal group in rural communities who say that that is all well and good but you need to remember the needs of rural communities and just because they are not black and not disabled doesn't mean that that are also not “at risk of exclusion...so in Oxfordshire there is a very strong lobby for taking into account rural diversity. [1]

So, again, this notion of being “different from” some aspect that is more mainstream (in this case, rural communities being different from mainstream minorities, if you will) emerges.

Visibility/Invisibility

There was a sense, at least among the Black interviewees, that the experience of being a “visible” minority was qualitatively different from that of other minorities who are less visible (i.e., white). Clearly, invisibility in this sense is most saliently related to skin color, as mentioned earlier by one interviewee. Invisibility was linked, tentatively in this preliminary analysis, to discrimination and exclusion:

...and it's usually the issue that if you want to whip up fear in people then you start talking about the numbers of minority people that are coming into the country... like, which minority people are you talking about? And it's usually the more visible minorities—the black people—because they don't talk about those white Europeans who are coming here in large numbers because of course they can come here—they're “Europeans”! [2]

Invisibility, however, is not limited to skin color. One interviewee compared her own experiences as an older woman to her partner's experiences as an Afro Caribbean:

My partner is Black—from the Caribbean. We have quite interesting conversations about how some of the things he’s experienced are not that different from what I’ve experienced as a woman, especially as an older woman—being invisible, marginalized, ignored-- all those things. It’s interesting but not necessarily being hard evidence of anything...For example, going into a shop and they serve the person behind you—just look straight right over you like you aren’t there. Or, we often joke about Oxford...the pavement/sidewalks are very crowded and people just bump into you and we say, “Oh, we must be wearing our invisibility cloaks today!” [1]

Diversity/Race

Similar to the earlier discussion about terminology, one more specific duality has to do with “diversity” as a distraction from issues of social justice and racial equality. The following interviewee (community organization) reflects on this point:

And I’ve listened very hard to discussions around what is now the topic of diversity and rarely, rarely do people ever mention the issue of race—they’ll talk about disability, they’ll talk about age, they’ll talk about gender, they’ll talk about faith even, but then the race one doesn’t get mentioned... because it’s not the topic that people want to talk about. And that for me is the uncomfortable part about diversity because it allows people to escape their responsibility for dealing with race. It’s not popular, as one MP said many years ago, it’s not popular—it’s a “no’ voter” because most people vote with their feet when you talk about race; if they think you’re going to be banging on about minority communities and rights of black people then they’re not going to vote [2]

But interestingly, another interviewee from the voluntary sector, when asked whether she thought that diversity was used broadly (as she uses it) or whether it is used to essentially mean “race,” she said that ‘quite a lot of people do use it as a term exclusively to race; others use it more inclusively.’ She also thought that more awareness has been raised as a result of the creation of the national Equality & Human Rights Commission—that “people now talk about the ‘7 strands’⁴ [1]

One interviewee, a local council employee whose remit includes mainstreaming diversity in the organization, distinguished between what diversity means in a professional context (at work) and what it means outside of work, where she suggests that it is “a nice word, but does it work in practice?” In other words, the meaning may change, depending upon the context.

In summary, while explicit views of “diversity” reflected an openness to differences, ongoing discussion revealed narrower views of diversity, or at least revealed

⁴ “The Equality and Human Rights Commission enforces equality legislation on age, disability, gender, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation or transgender status, and encourage compliance with the Human Rights Act.” (www.equalityhumanrights.com)

that interviewees challenged the term's inclusiveness. Questions like 'does diversity include these people?' or statements such as 'diversity mostly refers to those people' reflect the tension in individual's understandings.

Views of Equality

Discussions of equality were more limited due to time constraints in the interviews to date. Two main preliminary themes surfaced here as being related to equality. One theme questions what type of equality is being sought—equality of opportunity (access) or equality of outcomes.

Opportunity/Access vs. Outcomes

One important difference has to do with what participants thought that "equality" actually referred to: *equality of opportunity (access) or equality of outcomes?* Equality was most often understood by interviewees as equality of access/opportunity, and in a few cases, as equal treatment. Two interviewees mentioned that it is driven by legislation. No one discussed freedom from discrimination explicitly, though it was implied. One interviewee mentioned equality of outcomes and another said removing barriers to opportunity. These views were quite consistent with those provided at the community forum mentioned earlier. The following respondent, a non-Oxford faculty member who maintains an affiliation with Oxford, suggests

That is a difficult term. It can be used in different ways in different contexts; so you need a defined context. Equality of what? [8]

In discussing her efforts to secure a prayer space for a group of religious students, she asks,

How would equality apply to this? The non-religious might want the same thing [something equal]. Equality has its place but operates differently. [8]

Interviewees in the healthcare field had particular views about this distinction between equality of access and of outcomes. One gave an example of how within the African Caribbean community here, if a white person asks them if there is any problem with X or Y, they will smile and say "no" because of their lack of comfort. In a health situation, this means that the persons are perhaps not getting the care that they need. [3]

Another NHS worker gave the example that physicians' presumed fairness in 'treat[ing] everyone the same regardless of who they are' can actually lead to *poorer* health outcomes if those doctors have information about a particular demographic group--e.g., they suffer disproportionately from high blood pressure-- which the doctors do not act upon when they have the opportunity to see those patients, even if not for a blood pressure related reason. Acting upon such information in this way requires treating patients *differently*, rather than the same. This reflects both equality of access and of

outcomes, but does not mean treating patients equally. So for health care workers, at least, equality of access and of outcomes may be intertwined.

Some interviewees believe that equality is the basic foundation that must be in place before organizations and society can benefit from diversity. Others believe that equality and diversity work together, in parallel.

At the University, there is an assumption that diversity equals equality. [4]

There is a sense they (university administration) might fear promoting diversity because they might get this huge surge of different people— [they're] fearful of that. [9]

Fear/Reluctance

Another theme relating to both equality and diversity was fear. Fear has thus far been characterized by several participants' noting the fear among whites (presumably white, middle class, British) of being stigmatized as being racist by expressing a particular view or by saying the 'wrong' thing. This fear is seen by a few as being much stronger than the fear of any formal discrimination claims.

On the other hand, some of those who work closely in the community suggest that there is often extreme reluctance (rather than "fear" per se) on the part of many members of minority and ethnic groups to participate in 'the system'—whether said system involves accessing medical care, local authority resources, or services in the voluntary sector. As such, these groups remain marginalized and excluded even while organizations and local authorities present extensive and ostensibly inclusive diversity and equality policies:

[The racial equality council]...they think it's [racial equality] about dealing with issues with Black people and Asian people... and the struggle that the racial equality council has had to struggle with over the decade is that their remit is race, and race isn't about color alone, so that have the very diverse issue of having to deal with Black people, Asian people, White people who may present themselves in terms of... that they're a race...and Irish who have now been defined legally as having recourse under the law because they can be discriminated against on grounds of— they say race—but is it race or is it nationality? [2]

There are different dimensions [of diversity]--culture can be problematic: people pretend like they know more than they do (for example, about the hijab). Also, people feel that they *have* to know everything [about another's culture]. But they get their info from the media—it's a media based-culture. But how are people being supported? What are the barriers? Examples: not knowing who to go to; not enough access to information, advice, guidance; feeling scared of being marked out as different. [4]

Within the university setting, one interviewee pointed out that this majority consensus on things is part of the "masculine" academic culture—"people dislike having a 'different conversation' --*whatever the issue.*" [14] This interview also noted that

university departments become “defensive” when the discussion turns to diversity (or race thereof) in their units.

A participant from a large voluntary sector organization talked about the challenges of enacting change in her role as equality and diversity officer:

People don't want to change because they don't want to be viewed as racist. People want to say “I'm o.k...it's them...”

There were a few interviewees who balked at discussions of terminology altogether, seeing the emphasis on labeling concepts as a distraction from the real task of effecting change around diversity and equality:

When people talk about diversity they talk about it in small things. We should be asking: What is the problem and how to solve it? If the problem is that we have too many white faces at [this organization], then say that and then let's figure out what to do. If the problem is not enough working class people...then say it. [16]

I can't be bothered about nomenclature—it diverts attention from real issues. For all who are marginalized, it is unfair, if their suffering is because of class, ethnicity, whatever. [5]

Diversity, Equality & Community Cohesion

The foregoing discussion reflects some consensus, but also considerable tensions, regarding individuals' understandings of diversity and equality, and the relationship between the two.

Two findings of a research study on ‘what works’ in community cohesion⁵ are that:

“There is a consensus that cohesion relates to **encouraging positive relationships** between different groups (all groups – not just on ethnic lines, for example). This is usually regarded as more positive than simply avoiding problems and tensions, and respect for diversity and *meaningful interaction* (rather than mixing per se) is seen as key within this” and

“There is a clear emphasis on **the role of participation and engagement** as an indicator but also lever of cohesion. This is as universally recognised among stakeholders, as it is emphasised in current policy literature...”

If implicit understandings of diversity are indeed construed mostly along racial, ethnic, cultural lines, then the ability to encourage the positive relationships that are needed for

⁵ Research Study conducted for Communities and Local Government and the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, June 2007, the Department for Communities and Local Government, London

cohesion may be limited, thus making it more difficult for participation and engagement to also be leveraged for community cohesion.

*Social cohesion requires the building of an inclusive citizenship and a concerted attack on racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia. There were numerous examples in all four towns of activities aimed at bringing people from different backgrounds together. All four local authorities were working towards developing a more representative workforce, though in each case there was some way to go. All had developed positive action and monitoring strategies and management were actively responding to issues of underrepresentation with very clear plans of how to move forward. However, not all residents were convinced of the sincerity of these efforts and others saw it merely as a 'tick box' exercise.
(Communities & Local Government & Ratcliffe, 2006)*

While the existence of various tensions and conflicts around the diversity and equality concepts might challenge community cohesion, they can also provide an opportunity to ignite conversations around diversity.

Some would say that there is 'too much talk and not enough action' on these issues; others would say that the dialogue has never truly been open because people are afraid of being offensive, or being labeled as such; or perhaps simply resentful of the spotlight that has been cast on issues related to multiculturalism in society and therefore disinterested in dialogue.

However, there are few lessons that can be derived from these preliminary observations. Firstly, understanding that not everyone is on the 'same page' when they talk about diversity is important. This may seem simplistic but people frequently speak of diversity as though the other party (parties) know that they are actually referring to. Furthermore, individuals may presume, due to another's ethnicity, national origin, gender, age, etc., that they know where that person is coming from when they talk about diversity or equality but such is not the case. In Britain, the issue is complicated by the fact that its experience with the intermeshing of cultures 'on the island' is relatively new. If effective interactions among all sorts of diverse people are to occur, and positive relationships are to flourish, then a degree of surfacing of assumptions must take place.

Secondly, community, voluntary, and public sector organizations that serve very diverse constituencies are well-positioned to provide a space for dialogue to occur which not only helps their clients but also aids the organization and simultaneously serves the community.

And finally, context matters in terms of how these concepts are understood and enacted in organizations and in the community.

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