

Briefing paper: the experiences of minority ethnic communities in Hastings and St. Leonards

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Background and rationale

Whilst there is a developing corpus of research on the social problems found in some British seaside towns (e.g. social exclusion, deprivation, unemployment, substance misuse),¹ issues around race and ethnicity have yet to be examined to any significant degree.² This study seeks to contribute towards overcoming this gap in knowledge, focusing on the town of Hastings and St. Leonards in East Sussex. The town has seen significant demographic changes in recent years in terms of its minority ethnic populations. For example, East Sussex County Council (ESCC)³ has identified that:

- In 2007, 10.3% of the town's population were 'not White British'
- In 2009, 3.5% of the town's population were not British nationals
- In 2009/10, 3 wards had significant percentages of ESCC school pupils who were 'not White British' (Central St. Leonards 35%, Gensing 18.1% and Braybrooke 17.2%)

Hastings and St. Leonards thus represent an illuminating case study site for investigating issues of race, ethnicity, identity and cohesion in coastal environments.

Aims of the project

This project was underpinned by two main aims:

- 1) to highlight the ethnic diversity resident in this 'traditional' English seaside town and to challenge dominant portrayals that minority ethnic groups are external or marginal to the 'everyday' life of seaside towns (e.g. that they are simply tourists)
- 2) to investigate what specific features – if any – characterise the experiences of minority ethnic groups when living in a seaside/coastal environment (and one in which the majority of residents identify as white British), rather than an urban or rural one. In this regard, the project sought to explore, in a coastal context, the claim that 'racism is inherently the same phenomenon in both urban and rural areas but the way it is expressed and the way it is experienced is different and different solutions may be required'.⁴

Research methods

The data collection for the project took place between March and August 2010. Notable aspects of the research process include:

- An attempt was made to develop a 'shared' research agenda – meeting key individuals in the community in the pre-data collection phase to establish issues that local minority ethnic residents *themselves* believed should be addressed
- 39 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with minority ethnic residents in the town
- All participants were aged over 18 and so the project did not examine the experiences of children and young people. Participants included people born in Britain as well as those who were born overseas and migrated to the UK (for a variety of reasons, ranging from education to seeking political asylum). Interviewees included both

¹ See, for example: Agarwal, S. & Brunt, P. (2006) 'Social exclusion and English seaside resorts', *Tourism Management*, 27, 4: 654-70.

² A notable exception is the work of Gareth Millington on Southend-on-Sea. See, for example: Millington, G. (2010) 'Racism, class ethos and place: the value of context in narratives about asylum-seekers', *Sociological Review*, 58, 3: 361-80.

³ East Sussex County Council (2010) 'East Sussex migrant communities profile', Lewes: ESCC.

⁴ Dhalech, M. (1999) 'Race equality initiatives in south-west England' in Henderson, P. & Kaur, R. (eds) *Rural Racism in the UK: Examples of Community-based Responses* London: Community Development Foundation.

'visible minorities' and so-called 'marginal whites' (e.g. migrants from European accession countries). Unfortunately, due to resource issues, only individuals with English language competency could be selected for formal interview. It is acknowledged that this consequently excludes an important segment of the local minority ethnic population

- Interviews were supplemented by a large number of informal, *ad hoc* conversations with relevant individuals. Regular visits were also made to community and social groups, drop-in centres, and committee meetings. The researcher was also involved as a participant in Refugee Week (June 2010) and the Hastings Intercultural Organisation (HIO) football tournament (September 2010)
- Informed consent was gained from all interview participants. For ethical reasons, the names and any identifying features of participants have been changed/removed in all presentations and publications relating to this study

Headline findings

Population

- The minority ethnic population of Hastings and St. Leonards has increased substantially over the last decade
- There is significant diversity amongst the town's minority ethnic population, encompassing a wide range of ethnicities and nationalities
- There are a range of reasons why minority ethnic individuals have come to live in Hastings. These include employment and/or educational opportunities, coming to the town to retire, and being dispersed here as part of government immigration policy. In addition to this, a significant and increasing proportion (at the current time mainly young people) were born in the town
- In many cases, Hastings was not a purposely chosen destination for participants. Rather, their journeys were influenced by a range of factors, e.g. friends and relatives living there (i.e. processes of 'chain' migration), the location of language schools in the town and government asylum policy dispersal processes
- For those participants who have come from overseas, whilst the majority had some knowledge of 'English culture' before arrival, they had very little, if any, previous knowledge of the town or the English seaside in general
- In contrast, for some participants (particularly older people), their deliberate relocation from other towns in England represented an overt desire to experience a 'slower pace of life'. These individuals also often cited pleasurable childhood seaside memories as playing a part in their decisions
- As is characteristic of migration processes more generally, new minority ethnic residents adapt to life in the town at a variety of speeds. This is influenced by a variety of factors, e.g. economic status, employment opportunities, religion, ability to access services and cultural dis/similarity of previous location

Community and feelings of belonging

- For many participants, there is a tendency to talk about the 'BME community' *as a whole* as 'our community'. Being part of a minority ethnic group *per se* is seen as the main point of commonality. This may be due to the relatively small populations in each minority ethnic group and the subsequent absence of a numerically dominant minority community
- Whilst there are benefits to this strategy for its members, acknowledgement of minority ethnic *communities* in the plural is crucial to understanding the identities, issues and 'needs' of various groups resident in Hastings
- The process of minority ethnic community formation in the town is complex and arguably paradoxical. In one sense it can be straightforward, as the relatively small populations involved can potentially allow easy identification of co-members, interaction and organisation of activities. On the other hand, for some individuals, the idea of community is simply notional, as the size of the group, and the available resources and capacities to co-ordinate the network, are insufficient to represent anything more than simply a collection of people
- As such, there are examples of both clustering and assimilation/integration in the town. These respective trends are underpinned not only by the respective sizes and backgrounds of the different groups, but also by individuals' desires and preferences. For example, some participants mentioned that they do not want to socialise with

members of a similar background. Reasons for this include the desire to assimilate/integrate into the broader community, an attempt to improve English-speaking skills and anxiety around revealing personal details to co-nationals they do not know well (especially common amongst asylum-seekers, refugees and people of irregular migration status)

- Whilst it is often assumed that ethnicity is the key point of commonality in minority ethnic community formation, other elements are also significant. For instance, a shared Islamic identity is important for the town's Muslims, and the mosque is a significant source of local organisation and sociability for its members. The mosque does not have a dominant ethnicity amongst its worshippers and the Muslim community includes people from a wide range of nationalities. Other groups in the town mobilise around ethno-political identities and other interests, such as Tamils.
- A number of participants spoke about the town as a welcoming place, stating that they feel very much part of the wider local community
- Due to the small size of the various minority ethnic groups in the town and the inability of some to undertake broader community/networking functions, many participants spoke about feelings of isolation. This is sometimes accentuated by the absence of certain food products or particular cultural activities. In this regard, some individuals spoke of the difficulties in undertaking the 'cultural work' central to the maintenance of their identities and backgrounds, due to the absence of specific cultural influences and institutions in the town
- Isolation is also influenced by the season/time of year and the age of the individuals. For example, winter is perceived as a difficult time for older minority ethnic residents to get out and socialise, whilst the summer arrival of overseas language students gives the town a more diverse feel

Changes to the town

- All participants recognised that the town has become more multicultural over the last decade, particularly the St. Leonards area. Most made reference to the tangible changes to be seen (e.g. businesses, shops, cafes) in London Road and King's Road, but also to a changing 'feel' or 'vibe' in the area as a whole
- These changes are seen to have had a variety of positive effects. These include increased feelings of belonging and the availability of consumer goods, such as specialist foods. Importantly, it was often stated that it is not the quality of these products that is important (which can also often be more expensive than in other towns), but the emotional links with 'homelands' that they evoke
- Whilst the arrival of 'new' migrants is broadly welcomed by more 'established' minority ethnic residents, there is recognition that discrimination against more recent groups (e.g. asylum-seekers, refugees and people of irregular migration status) can impact on them as well. In this regard there is a belief that many individuals within the town's majority white population are unable (or unwilling) to differentiate between different groups

'Mainstream' attitudes to difference

- Most participants reported their experiences of what they feel to be a dated, uninformed attitude to multiculturalism and diversity in the town. This is viewed as manifesting itself both in individual attitudes and institutional procedures
- Participants spoke about encountering two, related dominant beliefs amongst sections of the majority white community that arise as a result of the relatively small number of minority ethnic residents in the town. First, there is a widespread perception that racism is not a problem in the town. Second, there is a pervasive institutional perspective that there is not sufficient need to provide specialist services for minority ethnic groups
- What might be celebrated as 'tradition' and 'nostalgia' for some people in the town is often interpreted quite differently by minority ethnic groups. These notions are frequently perceived to have *racialised* connotations, sustaining the 'whiteness' of the town and contributing to feelings of exclusion amongst minority ethnic groups. The Old Town was frequently mentioned in this regard

- There is a perception that there are difficulties in getting non-minority ethnic communities to engage with and attend minority 'cultural events' such as the St. Leonards Festival, whilst 'mainstream' events like the Seafood and Wine Festival are seen by some as marginalising minority ethnic groups
- Feelings of belonging have both temporal and spatial dimensions. Some participants (particularly older people) spoke of their anxiety around being out in the town after dark. Others spoke about particular places where they feel unsafe. Ore, Hollington and the town centre were mentioned as places which can be dangerous, whilst the Old Town was cited as an area where minority ethnic individuals often feel 'out of place'. In contrast, St. Leonards (particularly the London Road and King's Road area) was seen by many participants as the place in which they most 'fit in'. The seafront itself also evokes divergent feelings of belonging depending on the time of year, and the different types of people and behaviours that might be encountered during these periods
- Certain behaviours by other social groups were discussed which, whilst not directly related to racial identity, can have a disproportionate impact on minority ethnic groups. The main ones mentioned were fears around groups of young white British people gathering in the streets, and people who are drinking alcohol and/or taking drugs

Representations of the town

- It is believed that many agencies and organisations (e.g. those involved in tourism) do not highlight adequately the ethnic diversity of the town in their publicity and/or marketing materials
- There is a perception of failure by certain local institutions, agencies and the media to promote the benefits of multiculturalism and the positive demographic changes that have taken place in the town, and to challenge perceptions – both locally and externally – of Hastings as a racist place

Institutions, agencies and services

- Some 'mainstream' services and forms of advice/support are unfamiliar, unknown or seen as inaccessible to some participants. In some cases individuals do not know how or where to access them, whilst in others the attitudes and assumptions of providers prevent access and usage. Some participants spoke about their inability to access funding or spaces where meetings or events could be held. In certain aspects of provision, it appears that the 'needs' of minority ethnic groups are not being met
- As a result, organic community provision and the role of community groups/centres (especially 'one-stop shops') that are able to provide information and services to individuals who need them (as well as providing a place to meet and socialise) are perceived as a hugely important resource. They are crucial in circumventing the institutional, bureaucratic and attitudinal barriers found with certain 'mainstream' provision
- Many migrants in Hastings are employed in jobs/roles below their abilities and/or educational statuses, and/or experience difficulty in gaining certain forms of employment
- Some participants spoke negatively about Sussex Police, citing perceived differential treatment for minority ethnic groups (especially asylum-seekers, refugees and people of irregular migration status), both when victims and suspects of crimes

Racial discrimination

- Nearly all participants have experienced racism in the town
- Reported racist incidents include being physically attacked and receiving verbal abuse
- Some individuals spoke about the excluding effects of 'standing out' and literally being stared at by other people in the town. They also discussed the strategies they employed to avoid this, e.g. walking different routes that avoided the town centre. Others spoke about issues such as not using their mobile phones in public after dark to prevent their accents being heard by other people
- Whilst some individuals spoke about a decrease in racist incidents and their feelings of belonging and integration in the town, others went as far to describe the town as a whole as 'racist'

- There was a strong feeling that discrimination towards minority ethnic groups is exacerbated during times of economic downturn, with competition for jobs reducing neighbourliness and cohesion, and increasing inter-group tensions. General national economic trends are further compounded by specific local issues in the town around employment, education and pejorative discourses about minority ethnic ‘newcomers’
- Individuals who work in local shops reported discriminatory treatment by some customers. One participant spoke about the surveillance placed on him every time he visits a particular department store in the town centre
- One individual who works with asylum-seekers, refugees and people of irregular migration status stated that he does not think that they would bother to report racist incidents to Sussex Police. This is because of perceived inaction, and a belief that they are still better off than they had been beforehand, i.e. they are fortunate to be in the UK in the first place and discrimination simply has to be endured

Conclusions

As the aim of this research was to explore people’s identities, experiences, backgrounds and histories at an *individual* level, it is not possible in all instances to propose recommendations as to how the data might be used to improve services and provision for, and raise awareness about, minority ethnic groups in the town. However, a number of conclusions can be drawn that might help individuals working with minority ethnic groups in the town (and other coastal environments), including academics, policy-makers, local authority employees and service providers:

- Research with minority ethnic communities benefits from an approach that empowers participants and allows them to contribute to its design. Furthermore, relating to participants on a personal level, and attempting to downplay one’s role as part/representative of an institution or agency, can facilitate contact and rapport with people who might otherwise be reluctant to participate in such a project
- It is important to recognise notions of intersectionality and to be aware how other inequalities intersect with race and ethnicity in marginalising and excluding minority ethnic groups. For example, there are particular issues (e.g. around safety and isolation) which are more likely to affect older people
- In relation to some issues, reference to the minority ethnic community in general is appropriate, yet in others an appreciation of the specific identities of, and issues facing, individual groups is necessary
- The popular perception that racism is not a problem in places with relatively small minority ethnic communities is erroneous and needs to be constantly challenged. Likewise, the belief that specific services are only required when large minority ethnic communities are resident is incorrect. They are equally necessary in smaller communities as they can help to overcome the absence of alternative support networks and provision (e.g. family, community) that can characterise groups with low population numbers and/or in isolated locations
- There are aspects of the geographical location and social condition of seaside towns that influence racial issues in these places. For example, their position as peripheral, ‘out of the way’ places can result in an absence of residents having engaged with difference and diversity, whilst the downturn in seaside economies can raise tensions through competition for jobs. The seasonal nature of seaside life can also be an influence, whether this be the large numbers of language students visiting in the summer or issues of isolation during the winter.
- Minority communities are not just marginalised, excluded and discriminated against through overt racism. Other issues, such as being stared at, or the presence of large groups of young people on the streets after dark and drinking alcohol can contribute to a climate of fear
- More needs to be done at an institutional level to promote the benefits of the town’s diversity, both within Hastings and beyond
- Service providers need to be aware of the various barriers that can prevent minority ethnic groups accessing them, from a lack of knowledge as to how or where to access them, to the attitudes and assumptions of providers themselves. Crucially, it is evident these agencies do not purely reproduce these obstacles – in many cases they actually create and reinforce them

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