Interculturality

Interculturality:
Practice meets Research

Edited by

Martina Koegeler-Abdi and Richard Parncutt

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INTRODUCTION

MARTINA KOEGELER-ABDI
AND RICHARD PARNCUTT

Interculturality has always been a part of the human condition, but in an era of accelerating globalization, questions of interculturality have become crucial. Human quality of life and survival increasingly depend on how inter– and transcultural issues are addressed. Intercultural contact zones, conflicts and opportunities are becoming more widespread, frequent, and interconnected. The rising importance of interculturality is reflected by a growing frequency of media reports addressing inter– and transcultural phenomena, which in turn are influencing political strategies and election campaigns. Social and cultural configurations are constantly changing, and cultural representations are constantly being renegotiated. Technological advances and economic constraints are increasingly provoking and promoting the international mobility of cultural groups and cultural goods. Global issues such as environment, defense, finance, and the distribution of wealth and resources increasingly require cross–cultural cooperation. More and more political parties, decision makers, and NGOs of all persuasions are regarding inter– and transcultural issues as central to their work. To ensure its long–term survival, the human race is increasingly challenged to create global democratic institutions to regulate economic interactions (transactions on global markets, global taxation), and to prevent and mitigate damage to the environment (emissions, pollution, deforestation, fishing). Such institutions must inevitably deal not only with extreme inequalities in economic and social capital, but also with cultural differences.

The literature on interculturality tends to focus on aspects of interculturality, rather than consider the problem as a whole. The practically–oriented literature focuses on areas such as intercultural competence, communication, teaching, or theater. The research–oriented literature confines itself to the disciplinary boundaries of education, anthropology, philosophy, religion, communication, or literature. In this book, we aim for a broader view. We do not focus on any single area of practice or

research. Instead, we ask the general question of how to best bring together theory and practice in any and all areas of interculturality. We promote a holistic view of interculturality that is based on cultural groups and boundaries as they exist in today's world. We bring together diverse context–specific strategies to get a more comprehensive meta–perspective on interculturality, such that the knowledge and experience gained at one intercultural border may be applied at another. By attempting to bridge the gap between practice and research in different areas of interculturality, we aim to create a platform for the intercultural exchange of both practices and knowledge, and to promote dialogue between practitioners and researchers of all kinds. To our knowledge, no previous publication has approached interculturality and intercultural issues from this angle.

A comprehensive and holistic approach to interculturality requires that we simultaneously transcend three different kinds of intercultural boundary. First, there are boundaries between "ethnic" cultures at different hierarchical levels from continental (e.g. European versus African) to (sub) national (cultural groups within a single country). Second, most research, and most research about interculturality, can be divided into humanities (such as history and literature studies), sciences (such as empirical sociology and neurosciences), and practically oriented disciplines (such as education and medicine). These three overarching groups of disciplines have often functioned almost independently of each other. Scientists, for example, know remarkably little about the main questions, approaches and values of the humanities, while humanities scholars for their part are similarly surprisingly poorly informed about the sciences. This situation prompted Snow (1960) to speak of "two cultures", and half a century later little has been done to address the problems that he identified. Third, and this is the main focus of our book, universities traditionally address intercultural issues through research, while governmental and non–governmental organizations primarily approach interculturality through practice. We may thus speak of three kinds of intercultural division, which could be labeled ethnic, epistemological, and research–practice. All three involve difficulties of communication and interaction that are linked to different ways of thinking, communicating and problem solving, and all three may be hindered by a general lack of knowledge and awareness about the detailed nature of these differences.

The Conference on Applied Interculturality Research

The book is based on contributions to the first Conference on Applied Interculturality Research (cAIR), which was held at the University of

Graz, Austria, from 7 to 10 April 2010. Fifty project summaries were submitted to cAIR10; their authors lived in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, China, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Russia, United Arab Emirates, the UK and the USA. Most of these countries were also represented at the conference. The conference was organized by the editors of this book and financially supported from a number of different sources without whom the project would not have been realized. They are the Future Fund of the Republic of Austria (Zukunftsfonds der Repubik Österreich), who provided most of the funding; the City of Graz (Stadt Graz); the Austrian Federal Ministry of Research (Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung); the Province of Styria (Land Steiermark); the University of Graz (Karl–Franzens–Universität Graz); and a private donor (K. D. Brühl and Sons, Graz).

The acronym cAIR refers not only to the conference that took place in Graz in 2010, but also to the general concept and direction of that conference, as embraced in different ways by follow–up conferences and by this book. cAIR is a response to the rising importance of inter– and transculturality in national and international politics, civil society, research and education reflected by the increasing frequency of media reports addressing inter– and transcultural phenomena and questions of all kinds. Like interculturality, the goals of cAIR can be approached in different ways. One approach is to divide the promotion of positive aspects from avoidance of the negative aspects. On the positive side, cAIR promotes constructive intercultural communication and understanding, which can be seen as an aspect of social well–being. On the negative side, it combats racism and xenophobia. These two aspects interact and are often inseparable. The aims of cAIR, and of this book, also include the following:

- to support civil society, government and education by improving the accessibility and usefulness of research that is relevant to their concerns;
- to empower researchers in all areas of inter– and transculturality and all relevant disciplines to contribute positively to social and political developments;
- to facilitate interactions between practice and research in all areas of interculturality;
- to motivate NGOs, governments, academics, schools and universities to support each other and to offer them a framework;
- to encourage universities to invest their personal, academic and financial resources in Applied Interculturality Research—a promising area of interaction between research and society; and

- to promote high–quality projects by subjecting all submissions to careful, constructive quality control by international experts.

cAIR regards all groups, actors, approaches and opinions as equally legitimate and valuable, provided they are consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. cAIR also respects existing boundaries between cultural groups, however blurred. On that basis, cAIR promotes constructive discourse among communities with related goals. At the same time, cAIR strives for high standards of quality, relevance and impact by carefully evaluating project submissions. As far as possible, evaluations are carried out within corresponding (sub–) communities (areas of practice; academic disciplines). cAIR does not support unlimited freedom of speech and does not offer a platform to any project that the organisers or evaluators feel might exacerbate xenophobia or discrimination of any kind.

Aims of the Book

This book makes the concept and content of cAIR accessible to a wider public. We wish to improve the accessibility and usefulness of both good intercultural practices (by governmental and non–governmental organizations in any country, as well as schools and media) and good interculturality research (in universities, research institutes and outside of research infrastructures, in any country). We aim to promote high–quality projects that help practitioners to benefit from research, and/or researchers from practice. We hope to provide NGOs, politicians and researchers in all areas of interculturality, as well as the general public, with an accessible overview of possible research/practice exchanges and models for mixed communities of practice in academia and politics.

The primary aim of this book is to bring together practitioners and researchers in diverse areas of interculturality and encourage synergetic interactions between and among them. Intercultural work can be divided up and approached in different ways, but we are particularly concerned with the relationship between practice and research. On the practical side, most non–governmental organisations (NGOs), and many governmental organisations, are concerned—directly or indirectly—with issues of interculturality. On the research side, more and more research communities in humanities, sciences, education, law, economics and religious studies are turning their attention to intercultural issues. The persistent gulf between practice (governmental and non–governmental organisations, schools, media) and research (universities, institutes) suggests that there is

considerable potential for synergetic interaction between these two groups. The contributors to this book bring together practice and research in different areas of interculturality in different ways and to varying degrees. Their individual chapters provide models of good practices with implications beyond the specific subject matter at hand.

Given this background, we propose that solutions to intercultural problems can be approached best by a combination of *equality* and *strategy*. By equality we mean equality of opportunity: all relevant parties (national cultures, academic epistemologies, practice and research) should first be put on an equal footing to create a level playing field. On that basis, we strive for the rational development of strategies to solve intercultural problems, taking advantage of the knowledge and experience of all relevant actors; these may also involves new infrastructures to promote intercultural communication. The cases and projects presented in this book vary in background and discipline, but all have in common that they bridge the gap between practice and research, and all promote equality and strategy development in a specific area. We aim to explore these various interconnections, make their potential synergies visible, and provide concrete recommendations that may be of value to a multidisciplinary audience.

Finally, we aim to create environment in which unpredictable new synergies can arise as the diverse professional, national and academic associations of contributors and readers interact with each other in new ways. In this spirit, submissions were not limited to specific topics, beyond the general requirement of addressing central issues of interculturality in terms of interaction between practice and theory. Instead, reviewers evaluated the quality of the relevant practice and research represented by the chapters, which ultimately reflected the authors' expertise and experience. All contributions are written either by partnerships/teams of researchers and practitioners or by individuals with relevant expertise and experience in both intercultural practice and intercultural research.

Defining Concepts

Many of the central concepts presented in the book have different possible definitions, or their definitions are unclear because they are relatively new or their usage is changing. Our approach to defining or explaining selected central concepts follows; it is inspired by discussions of definition that took place at cAIR. Please note that the contributors to

the book were not bound to our definitions and may have used the same terms differently.

We use the term *intercultural* in the broad sense of any interaction between any cultural groups. Our understanding of the term *cultural group* is similarly general: it is a group of people with a common identity (an accepted label or linguistic marker for the group, and a feeling of belonging to it), common forms of behavior (including but not confined to customs, traditions, manners, expectations), common ways of seeing the world (including but not confined to religions, other beliefs and philosophies), common ways of communicating (including but not confined to languages) and/or perceptible signs of group membership (varying along a scale from voluntarily to involuntary, and including clothing, ways of talking, and skin color). Examples of cultural groups include national cultures (Turkey, Peru), language groups (Shipibo, English), subcultures (lovers of heavy metal or classical art), social classes (mega–rich, middle class, workers), genders (including transgender), sexual preferences, disabilities, age groups—in short, any feature with which a group of people can identify and upon which they can, if they choose, develop and experience a sense of community. A particularly interesting and relevant example of a cultural group is a *community of practice* (Wenger, 1998)—a group of people who identify with each other not primarily because of who they are (however defined), but because of what they do. A community of practice has common professional or artistic activities; examples include pianists, accountants, hobby pilots, and bird watchers, but also members of religious groups who identify themselves by means of traditional or codified customs and behaviors.

According to Spencer–Oatey and Franklin (2009: 3), "an intercultural situation is one in which the cultural distance between the participants is significant enough to have an effect on interaction/communication that is noticeable to at least one of the parties". Cultural distance may be regarded as a negative aspect of intercultural communication, but it can also be seen as an advantage and an opportunity. Any reduction of cultural distance by overcoming intercultural hindrances can lead to new intercultural communication. The future consequences of such communication are both significant and unpredictable. Similarly, the future impact of intercultural practice and research, and of the contributions to this book, can be difficult to predict. We do not know in advance where and when the effects will be felt, or by whom. That unpredictability is reflected by the diverse thematic spectrum of this book.

When considering questions of interculturality, it is important not to oversimplify concepts of culture. Cultural boundaries are generally fuzzy,

subjective, and in a state of flux. They are also structured in overlapping hierarchies and networks. Most people (including those without a recent background of migration) have *multiple identities* in the sense that they belong simultaneously to different cultural groups; we may speak of *cultural hybridity*. Cultural identity is generally *ambiguous and context–dependent:* the identity that a person feels or the cultural behaviors that she exhibits depend on the context in which she finds herself—the people she is with, the location, the situation. Finally, each individual is actively involved in the construction and negotiation of cultural boundaries. In the sociology of academia, the creation, reinforcement, questioning and dismantlement of boundaries between disciplines has been called *boundary work* by Gieryn (1983)—a concept that can be applied more broadly to the symbolic boundaries that demarcate any kind of cultural group, including class/economic, ethnic/racial, gender/sex, professional, national or geographical (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

The concept of interculturality generally includes *transculturality*; interactions between cultures generally change the cultures themselves. For example, the Egyptian Coptic community in Graz, Austria, is not the same as Coptic communities in Egypt, because the people in Graz have adapted to their situation in Graz.During that time they may not have adapted to changing social and political constraints in Egypt. It is therefore misleading to speak of cultural groups as if they were constant. All of the above–listed features of cultural groups (their behaviors, *Weltanschauungen*, linguistic and perceptible markers and so on) can change with time as a function of their changing situations, aspirations, constraints and intercultural interactions.

The word *integration* is often used in the general sense of a solution to problems of interculturality. This may be coupled with the tacit assumption that only migrants must change or adapt. When migrants arrive in a new country or city, they are expected to "integrate" while the "locals" (those who had been inhabiting that piece of land for a longer period of time) merely observe. The locals consider (perhaps correctly) that they have more rights than the newcomers, which justifies the implicit belief that only the migrants need to adapt. In reality, any society is changed by any influx of migrants of any kind. The locals inevitably adapt— just as the migrants do. The cultural groups to which both sides belong are changed by the interaction. Of course, both sides still retain important features or their original identity; the result is an increase in the multiplicity, ambiguity and context–dependency of their cultural identity. In this book, we use the term "integration" in this complex sense. It is generally an interaction that changes all participants.

We define a "practitioner" as any person who is professionally involved in any practical project or activity in any area of interculturality. That includes project directors/leaders, supervisors, coordinators, administrators, organisers, planners, developers, activists, artists, musicians, actors, teachers, educators, social workers, publishers, advisors, consultants, officials, promoters and policy makers. Similarly, we define a "researcher" as any person who is qualified in a relevant academic discipline (e.g. humanities, sciences; economic, legal, religious studies) and professionally involved in research in any area of interculturality. Interculturality research addresses all kinds and aspects of inter– and transcultural interaction.

Multidisciplinary Review Procedures

cAIR, and consequently this book, aims for an unusual combination of breadth (all areas of interculturality practice and research), constructive collaboration (interactions among those areas—especially between practice and research); and quality (ensured by fair, helpful evaluation procedures). It has not been easy to simultaneously approach these three goals. The greater the breadth, the more difficult the quality control, because experts from one area are not necessary experts in another, and accepted procedures for quality control are different in different areas. Similarly, collaboration becomes more difficult, the more distant two cultural groups lie from each other. Different cultural groups may also bring very different expectations to a common project such as cAIR. That also means that they have different implicit conceptions of quality. We considered this problem when deciding who would organize which aspects of the conference and who would edit this book. The two editors belong to the humanities and natural sciences respectively, which forces us to constantly negotiate this one boundary of different standards between us. However, due to the wide practical and disciplinary range, quality control needed a similarly broad spectrum of experts beyond our narrow editorial supervision.

At the risk of imposing a Western academic concept of quality onto such a broad project, we have attempted to ensure a high standard by a multi–level peer–review procedure. Peer review has the advantage that the people doing the reviewing belong (as far as possible) *to the same cultural group* as the people being reviewed, and so share ideas about quality and quality control as well as common ways of communicating. Although existing academic models are culture–specific and infected by the neoliberal spirit of our times, we had little alternative but to follow their broad direction; the same problem was encountered, incidentally, by the

Conferences on Interdisciplinary Musicology and the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Music Studies* upon which cAIR was modeled. The main aim of those research infrastructures was to bring together humanities and sciences in all areas of music research; by analogy, cAIR aims to bring together practice and research in all areas of interculturality.

Our review procedure was divided into three stages. In every stage, we aimed to remain sensitive to the different approaches to evaluating quality of practitioners and researchers, as well as other cultural groupings. In the first stage, which was double blind, contributions to the conference program were independently reviewed by two experts: one a practitioner and one a researcher in the specific area of the contribution. On the basis of those reviews, contributions were either accepted or rejected; a contribution was only rejected if both reviewers, practical and research, independently recommended rejection. In the second stage, conference presentations were invited to this book on the basis of their quality, as judged by the editors or other conference participants, as well as the relevance and diversity of addressed topics. In the third stage, invited written contributions to this book were reviewed by two experts—again, one a practitioner and one a researcher, and both working in the specific area of the contribution. As far as possible, these final reviewers were not the same as the original reviewers of the corresponding conference submission. Reviewers at this stage were offered the opportunity to remain anonymous, and most of them did.

Overview of the Book

This book is organized into three different parts, each grouping chapters from different disciplinary backgrounds around a common theme: Part I—Intercultural Education and Political Practices, Part II—Difference and Inclusion, and Part III—More than Words: Communication and Interaction. The team around Ruth Boyask, including scholars and practitioners, opens Part I with their contribution "Partnership research about 'difference': Co–constructing local educational policy."Their work applies person–centered methods to approaching young people on equal terms and learning about their experience of diversity in British schools. Together with the Plymouth City Council they apply their findings to create more equitable school policies in their local context. Matt Clement also works with British youth and school policies, but his research on "Deadly Symbiosis: How school exclusion and juvenile crime interweave" analyses the consequences of school policies as institutionalized forms of inequality that marginalizes and criminalizes certain children, taking class

into consideration as another aspect of interculturality. Sharon Schneider's "Transcultural School Social Work: A case study of children's rights in practice" analyses the relationship between student suspensions and their ethnic backgrounds, and develops a human rights–based social work approach to enhancing the wellbeing of a diverse student body. In the last chapter of Part 1, Marieke van Egmond and her colleagues look at "Cultural meaning systems of learning and their influences in the international university context." They reflect on the philosophical underpinnings of learning beliefs and their impact on higher education in an international university in Germany, asking students from a wide range of cultural backgrounds what constitutes learning for them. Their findings have already been implemented in intercultural training and orientation programs for faculty and incoming students.

Part II addresses the question how to theorize and at the same time work practically with intercultural difference. Andrew Ryder and Margaret Greenfields's chapter on "The Traveller Economic Inclusion Project: An inclusive and intercultural approach to research" presents the work of the "action research project" on the economic inclusion of Gypsies and Travellers in the UK. Their methodology exemplifies the interaction of practice and research on equal terms in that community members participate in the research and co–produce the methodology. Their chapter reviews the potential of this approach for social change and its implication for research processes. In "Neuland: Refugees and Austrian residents get connected," Margerita Piatti and Thomas Schmidinger facilitate and analyse personal intercultural communication in a specific majority/minority setting. The Neuland project promotes and supervises a buddy/tandem system between Austrian residents and refugees in a rural area of Lower Austria to build a community and decrease prejudice. The members of each tandem learn from each other in a series of formal and informal meetings. The chapter on "Race, genes, and culture" by Ulrich Kattmann theorizes "racial" difference as a social construct from a biological point of view. Kattmann offers an overview of the developments that lead to the correlation of physiological markers and so–called races, and he deconstructs these assumptions that have long been a fundamental source of racism. The chapter closes with a suggestion about how to address and deal with the very real effects of the fictional concept of race in daily life. Johanna Kint's team presents the chapter "Nextdoor/Quartier: Improving social cohesion in the Brussels neighborhood through research and design in interaction", which asks how the design and shaping of urban spaces affects communities and intercultural exchange. She describes how students experienced the creation and implementation of design

suggestions for a "migrant neighbourhood" in Brussels, and analyses not only the societal relevance of their research in a specific location, but also the necessity, and challenges, of including the inhabitants in design decisions and their implementation.

The contributions in Part III aim to integrate practice and research in diverse areas where not only communication, but also practical cooperation come into play. In the chapter, "Multilingual Graz—From research to practice," a team led by Barbara Schrammel-Leber maps out the linguistic diversity of Graz, Austria. They present their approach to the task of creating a database about linguistic diversity and its manifestations in city life. They then examine the role of language documentation and sociolinguistic interpretation in the development of institutional language policies. The team has also created a public exhibition and teaching materials based upon their research. Barbara Mazur addresses a different, and often overlooked, aspect of intercultural business communication and diversity management: religion. Her chapter "Managing Eastern and Western Christians in one organization" examines the role of Orthodox and Catholic religious affiliations in management, intra–company cohesion, and hiring practices in a Polish business context, and aims to sensitize management practices accordingly. The book closes with a contribution by Manju Jaidka, who describes the practice of transculturality through her own literary journey in "Building bridges: Literature across borders." Her work brings together theoretical and practical reflections on interculturality by asking what it means to engage holistically with this world as a practitioner/teacher, scholar and transnational promoter of literary exchange.

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PART I

INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION AND POLITICAL PRACTICES

CHAPTER ONE

PARTNERSHIP RESEARCH ABOUT "DIFFERENCE": CO–CONSTRUCTING LOCAL EDUCATIONAL POLICY

RUTH BOYASK, ARNET DONKIN, SUE WAITE AND HAZEL LAWSON

Abstract

We consider how a partnership between two universities in the South West of England and a unitary local authority was put to work to mutual benefit. We show how research might directly inform local policy by grounding research in a local authority's practical needs to address ethnicity and racism, maximising the impact of our research and responding to international developments in evidence–based policy. The study explored the potential of young people to act as expert informants in social policy decision–making by asking them to identify how they differed from one another, which differences impacted upon their schooling and comparing these differences with generic social categories such as ethnicity, gender, class, disability for example (Boyask et al., 2009b). One response to the findings of the project was a structured reflection upon the capacity of our local authority partner to enact policy initiatives informed by the young people (Boyask et al., forthcoming 2013). Our investigation suggested that while some national policies intended to provide for individual needs in recognition of diversity, in practice this was difficult. Most local policy decisions were made on the basis of the needs of social groups identified through centralised data gathering (such as school test scores and numbers of children accessing free school meals). We recognise tensions for local authority officers who must follow recent national policy directives that prioritise both social

group and individual needs. And finally, we suggest that dialogic partnerships between researchers and policy officers can inform policy decision–making by taking account of contextual understandings of social categories on the one hand, and dislodging the power of nationally defined categories of difference on the other.

Introduction

There are inequities within society that manifest themselves as trends in the social outcomes for some groups of people; groups are defined, for example, through ethnicity, gender, class, disability. Yet individuals are unique, experience group membership differently and consequently have different outcomes. This highlights a central dilemma for social policy that needs to be confronted in the pursuit of social justice: if policy–makers respond only to group needs and redistribute social goods accordingly, then individual needs may be overlooked; however, emphasising the uniqueness of each and every individual and attending to needs on that basis homogenises difference and is likely to reproduce existing social inequalities within society. While social policy has traditionally been concerned with redistribution of social goods along group lines, there is a tendency in recent policy initiatives to focus upon providing for the needs of individuals, articulated through national policies in England such as "Every Child Matters" (DfES, 2003) and "Personalised Learning" (DfES, 2006).

The social sciences have long sought to resolve the relationship and tensions between the individual and society theoretically; for example, Tajfel's (1974) theory of social identity in social psychology or Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration in sociology. However, while such arguments are theoretically robust and even translate quite readily to policy texts, conceiving of how their subtleties might work to influence practice is much more difficult (see Boyask et al, 2009a). Whilst the dominant assumption about the relationship between policy and practice is one of transmission, the actualisation of policy is inevitably much more complex (Ball & Bowe, 1992; Kaur et al, 2008). So for example, the individual has been inserted at the level of policy rhetoric in policies, such as those above, yet implementation efforts continue to be centred upon social categorisation (Boyask et al, 2009a). Our chapter engages with this problematic within a partnership between two universities in the South West of England and a unitary local authority. Together we have been researching young people's individual experiences of school and using these findings to explore through dialogue within one another the potential

of a research partnership for informing the enactment of local policy in consideration of the problematic of individual and group needs.

A Local Stimulus for Research Partnership

A conversation with our local authority partner particularly highlighted this problem for us. In a discussion on what our partnership and the results of our small scale study might contribute to his work and that of his colleagues in the local authority, he said that "we can only work within those established categories that are handed down to us" (Donkin, Arnet; Conversation 25 January 2010). Arnet experiences the weight of authority conveyed through national policy, and finds his capacity to define and act upon difference limited by handed–down categories. When enacting policy from the top down, he says that:

> it's easy to forget that what we are working with are human beings who have a complex multiplicity of identities and that the way any individual will experience life will not be as 'a black person' or as 'a looked after child'[1] but actually they will experience life through the interactions that they have with a whole range of different people and each of those people that they interact with will actually create their identity in a slightly different way (Arnet Donkin).

In essence, Arnet lives the central dilemma between social and individual difference that we are intending to address through our work together. It has been the intention of our work to date to refine our knowledge of non–categorical experiences of difference through researching the subjective experiences of young people in relation to difference and diversity and to use this knowledge for developing nuanced practices in school and other social institutions that neither homogenise nor over–generalise difference.

The importance of this work for us is that despite a constant flow of social policy initiatives that intend to address social inequalities, inequalities are entrenched within our society, and there is evidence to suggest these are exacerbating within particular communities (e.g. Blanden and Machin, 2007). To extend his capacity to respond equitably to need, Arnet must reconcile action upon two conceptualisations of difference, his utilisation of social group categories and his recognition of unique difference (see Lawson et al, forthcoming 2013). This reconciliation is necessary to enable him to negotiate the potentially over–generalising

[1] "Looked after children" are subject to a care order or voluntarily accommodated outside the home by the local authority under the Children Act 1989.

effects of the former and homogenising effects of the latter. Whilst his reflection upon the complex multiple identities of our young people participants reminds us that we share theoretical conceptualisations of difference, his accountability to national policy frameworks highlights the complexity of using these conceptualisations within practice. Working in partnership, we are ever mindful of the intractability of our task to find a balance that accommodates this tension.

In this chapter, we draw upon our project of working towards more equitable and nuanced responses to difference through a partnership between university researchers and a local authority. We proffer our hopes for working towards solutions, and also lay bare some of the difficulties we have experienced in taking forward our project. We focus our analysis through a recount of an exchange between two partners of this project, Ruth Boyask (researcher) and Arnet Donkin (policy adviser). The research team has worked to frame transcribed elements of a conversation between Ruth and Arnet that present the process of co–constructing understanding of difference, also drawing upon the report of the collaborative small scale study co–authored with Hazel Lawson and Sue Waite (Boyask et al, 2009b). This conversation was centred on the findings of the study, Arnet's response to the report of those findings and a discussion on how we might use those findings with others at Plymouth City Council. The overall study occurred just prior to the election of a new Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010.

The changes in government and policy direction have resulted in change to the role of local authorities in social provision. Under the rhetoric of personal responsibility and professional autonomy the substantive role of local authorities has shifted from social service providers to strategists and commissioning agents (see DfE, 2011). The enactment of the new policy focus is significantly influenced by wider economic issues. Local authorities have recently had their budgets cut, forcing them to implement the new direction alongside making substantial financial savings. While the changes have been underpinned by an espoused commitment to localisation, the focus upon economic efficiency has resulted in many challenges for fair distribution of social services. The changed locus of responsibility from central to local control suggests some consonance with our own work, yet we are concerned that responsibility has been devolved without reference to the concept of an overall social good nor adequate resources for localised provision.

The Context for our Study

The project team consists of three university researchers (from two universities in the South West of England) and a senior advisor to a local authority within the South West region, in the urban centre of Plymouth. The South West of England is a particularly important place to examine difference. It is accountable to national strategies regarding diversity, yet demographically there are fewer apparent differences as opposed to other regions in England. While Plymouth is distinctively more diverse in its ethnic and religious communities than other smaller areas and centres in the South West, compared with other English cities it is relatively culturally homogenous. Plymouth differs quite markedly from multi–cultural, multi–faith London, whose problems are normalised within most national policy (Ball, 2008). We are interested in how difference is experienced within our particular social context, and in what respects these experiences of difference might be better served by policies which resonate with the nature and characteristics of the population within this particular locality. We are attempting to find ways to negotiate between social and individual differences, researching specific experiences of difference and identifying within our data, discourses of social and individual difference.

There are substantial datasets and recurrent data gathering within both research and policy spheres that distinguish on the basis of social group difference (for example, the National Pupil Database). While such approaches are concerned with the application of predetermined categories of difference, the categories themselves are not fixed. Changing concepts of equity result in changes to the categories. For example, as the human rights discourse embodied in the United Nations declaration of 1945 fragmented and came to include race and gender rights, it became more important for social provision that government agencies tracked ethnicity and sex (Boyask et al, 2009a). As individual differences assume greater importance within the current diversity discourse, categorisation also changes. Arnet identifies a new category he has been given to work with:

> It is interesting that we now have got a new category around socio–economic deprivation, so that has suddenly been identified and recognised who you are, if you are a white working class boy. It has been there for a while, but now it is officially there. So now we can actually target resources into that area (Arnet Donkin).

Recognition may occur unofficially or emerge through the normal course of his work, but Arnet attributes significance to official recognition,

in that it enables him to put in place processes for redistributing social goods that are intended to change the material conditions of recognised identities. Yet his comment also implies that difficulties may arise when local authorities work from policies that recognise diversity or individual differences and not discrete social group categories. How do you make decisions about targeting resources without official categories?

The categories that influence policy concerned with social provision have proliferated, and the increase in numbers is also accompanied by substantive data gathering that has extended beyond categorisation to collect information about personal differences. For example the variables included in the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)'s *Longitudinal Study of Young People in England* (LSYPE) are intended to measure both social group differences (e.g. parental socio–economic status as a measure of class) and individual differences (e.g. personal characteristics). While we are yet to determine how best policy makers may make use of knowledge about individual differences to enhance social provision, we feel that improved understanding of the ways that young people differ from one another is important. However, we think the methods of data collection used by studies such as LSYPE do not go far enough. The LSYPE data collection, consisting of a questionnaire completed through face–to–face interview and some self–completion, makes assumptions about and constrains possible responses. The survey defines which individual differences between the young people are significant to their outcomes.

Grounding Policy through Local Insight

Our empirical work to date has started from a premise that young people themselves are a valuable source for insights on difference, to the extent that they can inform us about the kinds of difference significant for policy and practice. We maintain that these insights are best acquired through methods sensitive to diversity that reflect *how* participants choose to express their experience of difference as their substantive understandings of differences, such as allowing participants to choose personally and culturally appropriate modes of response (Waite, Boyask & Lawson, 2010). In February 2009 Plymouth City Council funded a small study that explored methods for prompting and capturing young peoples' recollections of difference throughout their life course, which generated some preliminary findings about the nature of those differences (see Boyask, Lawson, Waite & Donkin, 2009b for the research findings). We recruited forty 18–20 year olds whose "home town" was Plymouth and

invited them to attend a research evening. 17 young people attended the evening and two chose to withdraw by leaving the session early. The evening started with a 45 minute performance by four actors from the Mirror Mirror theatre company, who used Playback theatre (see Rowe, 2007) to stimulate the participants' recollections of difference at school. For the first four minutes each of the actors briefly told a story of difference from their own experience, and their narrative was followed by them and their fellow actors "playing back" or acting out the story. These were followed by narratives from the participant audience, similarly played back by three of the actors and facilitated by the fourth in the role of conductor. During the following 55 minutes the participants were broken up into three groups facilitated by the Playback actors and observed by researchers undertaking three different activities. The first activity was a small group discussion on words and ideas about difference, intended to explore appropriate language to use with young people with different educational histories. After this discussion, participants were asked to make an individual choice of expression to represent their recollections of difference at school using video diary, conceptual mapping, and timelines, for example. Finally the small groups came back together to discuss the kinds of times, places and people who had been significant in their recollection. The whole group reconvened for a final 15 minute plenary session facilitated by the theatre company.

Whilst the findings from the evening were largely methodological (for further details, see Waite et al, 2010), we also generated some preliminary findings that represented the young people's conceptualisations of difference. Through this project, the project team has come to characterise the tension between social categories and individual experiences as one between the general and the specific. That is, social groups or categories are formulated from generalisations about the experiences of individuals, yet our investigations of specific cases reveal that subjective experiences do not readily map onto such generalisations. Some young people within our study recalled difference as a much more personal and nuanced phenomenon, often closely associated with temporal, spatial and relational aspects of their life experience. For example, one young woman suggested there are differences between primary and secondary school. "In primary school they keep you repressed, they don't tell you about the world" (audio–recording, 19th February 2009). She suggested that growing up happens in secondary school when you are forced to confront real–life challenges like taking national qualifications. Even when experience of difference did accord with official categories, our data suggested that young people's identification with social group categories had been