

Diversity in the spotlight: highlighting perspectives on race, culture and migrants

Thursday 22nd November 2018 at The Bond, Birmingham

Conference report

Despite freezing weather and the street disruptions from the HS2 construction, most of our 30 or so delegates made it to our canalside room provided by the Bond, Birmingham, for a very stimulating day of presentations and discussions.

The speakers' presentations, along with a compilation of abstracts and speaker biographies, are also available to download at <https://www.vssn.org.uk/events/diversity-in-spotlight/>

Morning session

After a short introduction and welcome from Vita Terry who had co-organised the day with Linda Milbourne, **Asif Afridi** from *Birmingham Race Action Partnership* (brap) started by challenging the audience to consider whether the voluntary sector was growing more or less equal and diverse. This revealed deep scepticism among participants about any positive changes for BAME organisations. Asif argued that we need new ways of listening to racism and racist discourses and drew on insights from contributions to the *Civil Society Futures* inquiry, which included material from across the sector and the country. In moving forwards, he felt that while statistics on diversity and representation were important, as also achieving more diverse and equal representation at board level, for instance, these approaches could lead to well-meaning words but little meaningful change. Instead, Asif argued for the importance of a relational approach and learning lessons from history; and for a national conversation in the sector, which would better embed structural thinking about race as a core challenge across civil society, rather than being sidelined in surface-level changes.

The second speaker, **Palmela Witter**, a community development, youth and education worker, and recent researcher, focused on Black women's activism, particularly at a time of rising knife crime and service cuts. Palmela argued that the voices of the wider community are missed in discussions around youth and violence, with women and mothers by-passed by government 'throwing mud' at the issue. Building from a critical Black feminist

perspective, this presentation made the argument that this lack of representation ‘takes emotions off the table’, with a post-colonial approach to research methods demonstrating how certain people’s histories and views stay hidden, limiting the social development and the wider analysis that can take place.

Liz Bailey from the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Birmingham made the final morning presentation, reporting on her historical research with London Black Women’s Health Action Project (LBWHAP). Founded in 1982 the group was established by women in the Somali and Arab communities in the Bethnal Green area of London, to address the specific health needs of black women which were often ignored or racialised by an NHS, tending to concentrate services on the needs of the white British population. The organisation provided education, support and advocacy, with a key focus on female genital mutilation. Liz’s presentation demonstrated how mutual aid and social solidarity were present in the 1980s, contrary to common conceptions. But the group’s current position was much more precarious, struggling for funding in a competitive, commissioning-led landscape, leading potentially to fractured trust among a range of negative consequences.

VSSN AGM

The morning closed with the VSSN’s annual general meeting, including the normal AGM business and a report on the five different events held during the previous year, including a new initiative of a research writing workshop.

Other reports included on membership, finance, elections and future plans, and proposals to update the existing constitution were agreed. For details, see <https://www.vssn.org.uk/about-us/>

Discussion of the VSSN journal, Voluntary Sector Review, and plans for a day conference in May on small and below the radar organisations contributed to a short information exchange around research and possible future events.

Afternoon session

Abi Woodward began the afternoon with a presentation from her research on the experiences of Pakistani Muslims in Sheffield, to offer insights into their day-to-day coping strategies. Statistical data suggest that the Pakistani group in the wider population is most likely to experience persistent poverty but less likely to access welfare services and food-aid. Abi was therefore looking for answers to questions about how these groups were ‘getting by’. Based on 23 interviews and a focus group with Pakistani Muslims in deprived neighbourhoods in Sheffield, Abi found that they largely engaged in self-help and mutual-aid as a means of coping, demonstrating how cultural, religious and family values provide a vital safety net. She compared these findings with those of her co-PhD student who had explored the lives of 8 young males - ‘hidden NEETs’ – not claiming welfare benefits. Together the

studies generated valuable qualitative findings on ideas attached to welfare benefits, work ethic, poverty and ways of handling financial insecurity.

Mike Aiken followed with a thought provoking presentation on the experiences of a community development initiative – a *pledge* for the NHS (2018) - that arose from a city level campaign to contest the restrictions in accessing UK health care, particularly affecting vulnerable groups including refugees, migrants and asylum seekers. Mike firstly outlined the context of the ‘hostile environment’ and its local effects. He also referred to the long history of pledges in challenging injustices and codifying citizens’ rights. Mike then explored the difficult process of coalition building among civil society groups, and the complexities and challenges of drafting, agreeing and launching a pledge in non-hierarchical groupings. Unfortunately, because of technical difficulties, Mike had to quote the voices of those involved in developing the pledge, rather than play their audio recordings. These included individuals from campaign groups, migrant support groups and voluntary organisations. Mike concluded by reflecting on the extent to which those involved see such initiatives as challenging injustices, strengthening the affective power of civil society groupings and providing a voice for those experiencing injustice or a route to further action and changes in policy and practice.

After a short break, **Lucy Mayblin** presented her findings from a large study mapping refugee and asylum seeker support, analysing the extent to which civil society organisations were filling badly needed support gaps. Lucy highlighted the poverty created by a policy regime which both excludes asylum seekers from access to work and denies them rights to public welfare benefits and support. This study set out to map the scale of the response nationally, which served to emphasise the limitations on data available both related to refugee and asylum groups and less visible or informal third sector organisations. While many volunteer-based, third sector and self-help groups are providing advice and help, the findings highlighted the inadequacies of government policies, which are ostensibly breaching human rights in failing to meet the basic needs of these groups but effectively ensuring that they remain in destitution.

Closing plenary

Jan Etienne and **Phil Ware** led the plenary, summarising their reflections on the day and some key issues raised. Jan highlighted points from different presenters, and the overwhelming perception from participants responding to Asif that the situation for BAME organisations had deteriorated. Jan outlined her involvement with Womanism, community action and higher education, including work to de-colonialise the curriculum and stressed the important relationship between education, civil society and the voluntary sector, alongside the need for links between activists and academics in order that marginal voices are heard. She emphasised the importance of the day’s discussions in giving space to vulnerable and little heard groups of people at a time when civil society appeared to be generating divisive, xenophobic and racist groups, some linked to wider populist movements.

Jan observed that it was a significant step to acknowledge the limited research debate around the work of the grassroots Black and minority ethnic voluntary sector, and that this event was a positive start in bringing some of this activity into the wider discourse on civil society organisations. It was timely and reflected more widely in issues like the Windrush scandal, which had been longstanding and was finally being acknowledged publicly. She recognised that opening up these discussions can be challenging, particularly for those from a white British background who may be concerned about 'getting it wrong' and welcomed the different research coming forward. She felt positive about people's desire to be involved and make an impact, encouraging people to pursue projects about how to take issues around injustices forward differently, across the board.

Phil Ware outlined his own history as a community development worker and subsequently in research with the Third Sector Research Centre in Birmingham where his work on Black community organisations has generated several papers. Phil reflected that it was heartening to see such a range of engagement with the topic across the presentations. He felt that the first key theme was around the extent to which gains assumed in the 1990s and 2000s were, in fact, perhaps not the gains we thought at the time, and are effectively now losses. He identified diversity, dispersal and mental health as topics from the day which were all influenced by, or symptoms of, this negative trend. Phil also emphasised the extent to which anti-racist policy or 'race on the agenda' is becoming invisible, citing Brexit as evidence of ways that things have changed, with racists gaining more confidence. He also called for us to think about how we can challenge the current climate, in order to reverse these losses.

Questions and discussion focused on what a 'national conversation' on anti-racism might look like and the extent to which individual responsibility to tackle these issues through conversations with colleagues, friends and families is called for, in order to influence patterns of acceptance and behaviours. It was also proposed that we consider who was not present at the event and how we might best engage them through less formal events. The plenary concluded with a brief discussion of how we avoid displacing race whilst taking an intersectional approach on wider inequalities.

Participants were invited to work in partnership with VSSN to develop other events, such as round table discussions and informal events around diversity to further these discussions.