

# Encountering difference in the workplace: Superficial contact, underlying tensions and group rights

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# **ENCOUNTERING DIFFERENCE IN THE WORKPLACE: SUPERFICIAL CONTACT, UNDERLYING TENSIONS AND GROUP RIGHTS**

## **ABSTRACT**

Employment, demographic, cultural, and legal changes in Europe over the past 40 years have brought unprecedented numbers of minority groups into organisations at all levels, and research suggests that most workplaces are likely to become even more diverse in the future. While much attention has been paid to negative experiences of minorities in the workplace, it also has the potential to be an important site of prejudice reduction. In response, drawing on original quantitative and qualitative data, this article explores the encounters of socially different groups in the workplace. It demonstrates that workplaces can promote meaningful encounters. However, cases of positive encounter with difference were often discussed at the level of the individual, with reference to specific people and friendships, rather than towards the minority group to which the individual belonged. As such, these positive encounters were often superficial with underlying tensions still existing between different groups in the workplace.

**KEYWORDS:** encounters, equality, prejudice, workplace, qualitative, UK

## **INTRODUCTION**

Workplace discrimination along the lines of gender, disability, religion and sexual orientation has been extensively documented in research which spans a number of disciplinary contexts and decades (e.g. Hall 1999; Hearn *et al.* 1989; Herbert *et al.* 2008). Particular attention has been paid to gender segregation and racialisation in the workplace. For instance, in relation to gender, McDowell (1997) details how it is assumed that workers are required to adjust their bodily performances to ‘embody’ the organisations that they work for in order to become and remain employees of certain companies. Likewise, many studies have explored the treatment of black and minority ethnic workers within organisations in the context of ‘institutional racism’ (e.g. Creegan *et al.* 2003).

However, the growth (and competitiveness) of the global labor market has meant that employers have increasingly begun to recognise diversity as a Human Resource and management/business priority (Ben-Gaim and Campbell 2007). As the make-up of the European labour force has changed, so too overt prejudice and discrimination has been challenged by equality legislation. Most notably, Article 13 of the Treaty of Amsterdam - signed by European Union members in 1997, but which did not take effect until 1999 – established a requirement for states to protect their citizens from discrimination on the grounds of sex, race or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability age or sexual orientation. In a UK context, for example, the EU directive contributed to a rethinking of equalities legislation which led to the introduction of a new *Equality Act* (2010) which brought together over 116 separate pieces of legislation into one single legal framework. This legislation requires people to be treated equally in most aspects of public life – not just employment -- regardless of the protected characteristics of: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. This has arguably facilitated the more open expression of differences, such as sexual orientation, disability and religious belief at work which individuals were previously reluctant to disclose for fear of encountering discrimination. As such, the workplace is increasingly becoming a potentially important site through which people encounter difference.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

There is a growing body of academic research, particularly within geography, which suggests that the process of mixing as a consequence of everyday convivial encounters has the potential to generate progressive social and ‘good relations’ across difference and to reduce prejudice (e.g. Amin 2002; Valentine, 2008; Bridge and Watson 2002). However, to-date this research has primarily focused on chance encounters as a consequence of incidental proximity in spaces within the city such as cafes, parks, markets, or public transport (e.g. Laurier *et al.* 2002; Laurier and Philo 2006; Wilson 2011). Indeed, there is a growing body of work on ‘geographies of encounters’ (Keith, 2005; Simonsen, 2008; Valentine 2008) in modern cities. Such research considers how the ‘being-togetherness’ facilitated by urban space can create

encounters marked by cultures of care and regard against the backdrop of communities continually changing due to migration (Cook *et al.* 2011; Amin 2006).

Public encounters in the city are predicated on the concept of civility (Goffman 1961; Amin 2006; Fyfe *et al.*, 2006; Boyd 2006; Valentine 2008). In particular, civility is credited by Boyd (2006: 863) with ‘easing social conflicts and facilitating social interactions’ and thus playing a vital role in contemporary urban life. According to Laurier and Philo (2006), certain types of courteous behaviour, for example, holding doors open for people, and communicating pleasantries represent a form of everyday togetherness which Thrift (2005) argues leaches kindness into the wider world. Although other commentators have been more skeptical suggesting that such incidental encounters are banal, superficial and do little to challenge or disrupt more deeply held prejudices (Amin 2002; Valentine 2008).

Relatively little consideration has been given to institutional spaces such as the workplace (though see Andersson *et al.* 2012; Hemming 2011; Wilson 2013 on schools/universities and Andersson *et al.* 2011 on the church) where encounters with difference occur within a more formal framework and are mediated by workplace regulations, line management structures and the norms of particular workplace cultures. This neglect of the workplace, is surprising since politicians, policy advisors and media commentators have come to agree that civic agreement and shared values are needed to reconcile inter-cultural differences. Notably, following riots in northern English cities in 2001 a report by Ted Cante (Home Office 2001) argued for the need to develop ‘community cohesion’ as the basis for positive multicultural engagement. This he argued must be rooted in individual commitment to common norms and values, interdependence arising from shared interests, and individual identification with a wider community. Subsequent academic studies have suggested that regular encounters across ‘difference’ structured around shared goals in micro-publics (such as community spaces, the workplace, sports clubs etc.) can improve feelings towards members of a minority group (e.g. Amin 2002; Mayblin *et al.* 2015). Moreover it has been suggested that positive social relations may develop more readily or lastingly through such structured encounters than through chance or incidental encounters in everyday spaces such as in cafes, markets and on public transport (Amin 2002).

In response, the article draws upon original material to examine the processes through which attitudes (positive and negative) towards ‘others’ are developed, transmitted and/or interrupted at work. It explores how social relations materialize through the regular encounters and shared goals that this type of institutional space offers, in contrast to chance encounters in everyday spaces of the city. In doing so, it contributes to the field of equality and diversity through its focus on encounters with difference in the workplace.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study upon which this article is based involved both a survey of social attitudes (survey  $n = 1522$ ) and qualitative multi-stage research ( $n = 30$ ). A survey of social attitudes was conducted between February and April 2012 with an adult population (18+) in Leeds, UK. This asked about the respondents’ encounters with people who are different from themselves in terms of ethnicity, religion, sexuality and disability in many kinds of sites, including the workplace. It was a Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) in their homes. We applied a random location quota sampling design. This approach mixes a random selection of respondents with more purposeful sampling across different demographic profiles (Piekut, *et al.* 2012). As with many research topics there is a risk of social desirability bias namely, that survey respondents may answer in a more positive way than they actually feel to please or make a favourable impression on the person conducting the research. This issue was addressed in this study by employing multiple research methods that provided different types of opportunity for participants to provide accounts of their attitudes and experiences which can be triangulated. Specifically, on the basis of the survey, 30 participants were recruited for the qualitative research. This involved individual case studies. Each case comprises a time-line, an audio-diary, a life story interview, a semi-structured interview about attitudes towards difference, and an interview reflecting on the emerging findings. The informants were sampled to include those from a range of social backgrounds (in terms of socio-economic status, occupation, gender, ethnicity, religious/belief, sexual orientation and (dis)ability); whose personal circumstances and lifestyle affords them a range of opportunities for/experiences of

encountering ‘difference’; and to reflect the range of responses to the prejudice survey. All of the quotations included in this article are verbatim. Ellipsis dots are used to indicate where minor edits have been made. The phrase [edit] is used to signify a significant section of text has been removed. The names attributed to speakers are pseudonyms.

## WORKPLACE DIVERSITY

Table 1. Workplace diversity in Leeds (percentage distribution)

	Roughly what proportion of your work colleagues...					
	have a different gender from you	are of a different age group from you	have a different sexual orientation from you	have a different religion from you	have a different ethnic background from you	are disabled
<b>None or almost none</b>	17.6	7.4	52.7	22.8	33.4	81.9
<b>Less than a half</b>	27.4	16.9	28.9	29.1	36.5	16.4
<b>About a half</b>	32.7	30.1	3.5	15.0	12.9	0.6
<b>More than a half</b>	18.2	36.5	1.9	13.9	12.7	0.4
<b>All or almost all</b>	3.9	8.8	0.9	6.7	3.9	0.0
<b>Don't know</b>	0.1	0.4	12.2	12.6	0.6	0.7
<b>Total</b>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: [data anonimised], N=691.

We asked respondents who were in employment at the time of the survey (45.5% of the sample) to assess diversity in their workplaces. The workplace diversity questions were only answered by people in employment (at the time of the survey) and those not working alone, so although total sample size was 1522, the workplace questions were answered by fewer respondents. It is not surprising that most people work with some co-workers from different age groups (92%) and of different genders (82%). However, our results demonstrate that only 17% of respondents had co-workers with a disability. In terms of sexuality, more than half (53%) did not identify any work colleagues as lesbian, gay or bisexual. The respondents’ workplaces were more diverse in terms of ethnicity and religious affiliations. In our sample two thirds of people worked with colleagues of a different ethnicity or religion from their own. Table 1 presents the percentages of respondents by workplace diversity level. It should be noted that the table shows employees’ perceptions of diversity in their

workplaces, rather than actual diversity. It was not possible to obtain actual data about the demographic make-up of our respondents' workplaces because the equality and diversity data held by most employers is reliant on self-disclosure and therefore often incomplete or inaccurate and in most cases is considered confidential. The issue of perceived versus actual diversity has been explored by the authors elsewhere in relation to the neighbourhood (Piekut and Valentine 2016a). Namely we recognize that participants may misjudge an individual's social identity, by for example, jumping to conclusions about some one's sexual orientation on the basis of stereotypical or heteronormative ideas about how gay and lesbian people look and behave. However, we follow the lead of the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission, which in defining discrimination, classified perceived characteristics to be as significant as actual characteristics because it is 'perceptions' upon which people act.

To test whether people encountering difference in the workplace are less prejudiced towards minority groups, we compared attitudes (measured on a scale 0-100)<sup>1</sup> of respondents working in not diverse, semi diverse and very diverse settings (i.e. with more than a half of different coworkers). There are statistically significant differences between attitudes in relation to ethnicity; however, the effect of workplace diversity is not linear. The most positive attitudes are expressed by people working in workplaces where less than a half of employees are of a different ethnic background from a respondent ( $M=65.0$ ,  $SD=19.2$ ). Those working in homogenous ( $M=58.3$ ,  $SD=19.0$ ) or very diverse places ( $M=62.1$ ,  $SD=19.0$ ) – expressed most negative attitudes towards people of minority ethnic backgrounds. A similar pattern is observed in the case of sexual prejudice and disablism. People working with some co-workers from a sexual minority have significantly more favorable attitudes towards them ( $M=69.8$ ,  $SD=21.6$ ) than people without such colleagues ( $M=61.2$ ,  $SD=22.1$ ). Likewise, respondents with disabled people in the workplace expressed more positive feelings towards disabled people in workplaces where they were present ( $M=80.1$ ,  $SD=19.8$ ) than respondents working in places where they were absent ( $M=78.4$ ,  $SD=19.6$ ).

The survey also asked about recent experiences of discrimination in various sites. A quarter (24.6%) of all respondents to the survey stated that they have personally been discriminated against in the last five years. Whilst workplace encounters with

difference appear to improve social relations (as shown above), the workplace was sometimes the most common site where respondents identified they themselves encountered discrimination (indicated by 31% of those discriminated), followed by public places (18%), places of leisure (17%) and educational places (10%). These results suggest that interactions in the workplace are often a source of tensions and exclusions.

The evidence of the survey is thus complex. It demonstrates that the workplace is a potential site of ‘meaningful encounter’ with difference where there is perceived to be a demographic balance in this space. But either a lack of diversity or a perception of too much diversity in a workplace can generate tensions and lead individuals to experience feelings of discrimination or exclusion. Further analysis of the survey is beyond the scope of this paper but is explored elsewhere (Piekut and Valentine 2016b). In the remainder of the article we draw on the qualitative research undertaken in this study to reflect on the participants’ accounts of encountering difference within the workplace in order to unpack these results. We consider the nature of encounters reported as positive, explore the extent to which this contact with difference has, or has not, changed the way their relationships are lived in the wider world, and examine the cause of tensions over difference in the workplace.

## **POSITIVE ENCOUNTERS IN THE WORKPLACE**

Most of our research participants acknowledged that their workplaces have become increasingly diverse over time as a product of migration and other wider social changes. As a consequence they mix with a number of different nationalities, and people with diverse religious beliefs, as well as sometimes encountering openly gay colleagues. The growth of such encounters are supported by research with migrant workers (Cook *et al.* 2011; McDowell *et al.* 2009; Wills *et al.* 2009), and studies of both sexual orientation (Colgan *et al.* 2007, 2009) and religious belief (Hicks 2003) in the context of employment, all of which also demonstrate the diversity of the modern workplace. Some of our respondents suggested that the changing demographics of the workplace represent a positive development.

Like encounters in public space some of the mixing that occurs in workplaces is



incidental, a consequence of accidental proximity in social spaces, such as the canteen, rather than a product of the organisation of work, or specific workplace activities. The respondents below, for example, describe the positive encounters they have each had with colleagues of different ethnicities and nationalities as a result of being thrown together by chance in their work environments.

At work... there used to be quite a mix of us that used to sit and chat... Two of us were white and there'd actually be a girl from Eritrea, a girl from Jamaica, a girl from Greece, a girl from Portugal. Then an Indian lad. So we had quite a mixed bunch. We didn't just set out to go and meet a bunch of them. We generally were in the canteen at the same time and we enjoyed each other's company. So we used to just sit and chat (Male, 30-34, professional occupations).

[Referring to a past workplace] You've got your own ideas, obviously, of how you'll react to ...race and the diversity and all the rest of it. But then, when you do get involved with these people and sit down with them in a workplace or whatever, I think you suddenly realise that, this guy is exactly the same as me. He's no different to me. He may worship a different God or he may have a different way of doing things, but at the end of the day, he's only like me. He's no different... The workplace was a strong mix of Afro-Caribbean, white British, Asian, all the different elements of different people. We made some really good friends ... (Male, 60-64, manager and senior officials)

Such banal everyday sociality at work enables people to get to know individuals from very diverse backgrounds and who live different lifestyles. This can result in recognition of commonalities across apparent differences and the erosion of stereotypes about 'others' which can challenge prejudices. The respondent below, for example, describes how interacting with East European migrants in the shared space of a factory has contributed to changing his thinking about immigration. Interestingly he is bisexual, but despite belonging to a minority group himself, this did not reduce his prejudice towards East Europeans as another minority until he actually encountered them in the workplace.

I did think that they [East Europeans] were very standoffish and quite abrupt. Then I think when I went to work at this food factory and actually met them, I realised that in fact they were fine... So I think in the case where just actually having the opportunity to meet some normal Eastern Europeans made me get over thinking that the rest of them were a bit rude (Male, 20-24, full-time education).

Beyond the development of familiarity as a result of incidental proximity at work, workplace activities themselves can contribute to generating positive relationships across difference. Specifically, at work people are commonly required to work together as equals on shared tasks in pursuit of a common goal, sometimes in challenging circumstances (Amin 2002). In some cases work itself necessitates colleagues to attend social events or functions together in which their work responsibilities can blur into sociality. In such ways the nature of work itself can contribute to prejudice reduction because of its capacity to manufacture connections.

I suppose for me working with such a diverse set of people, that's what's probably changed my views. I think it's made me a better person, working with people from different backgrounds and nationalities and religions... Embrace it and know - despite the colour of their skin, despite their religion, despite their sexuality, they're there to do a job with me and without them - they're important in our machine. In my industry I need their help as much as they need my help within the workplace. You've got to put your differences aside and get on with what you're there to get on with (Male, 30-34, associate professional and technical occupations).

There are lesbians in the office that I work in. There are three... There's Nancy... It's great, and we go out as a senior management team. We go out on different things, different functions and that, and Nancy's always there, and we have a great time with her. She's very, very open about it and she'll have a laugh about it. It's brilliant to talk to her... I've got no hang-ups on it, none whatsoever, and nobody else in the office has (Male, 60-64, manager and senior officials).

In sum, the evidence of this section is that the workplace can facilitate positive encounters across difference. Diverse organisations produce chance interactions as a

consequence of the proximity of difference, but work activities themselves also have the potential to generate connections as a consequence of the artificial or forced circumstances they create. These encounters can reduce prejudice at work through fostering a familiarity with ‘others’ which in some cases develops into individual friendships across difference. However, previous research has suggested that for encounters to be successful in reducing societal prejudice such positive outcomes must be scaled-up beyond the time and space in which they occur (Valentine, 2008). This therefore raises the question of whether positive experiences with difference at work are translated into other aspects of employees’ lives and whether friendships with individuals from minority groups can change employees’ attitudes towards the groups these individuals might be perceived to represent in wider social relationships.

### **THE TRANSLATION OF ATTITUDES BEYOND THE WORKPLACE**

Most of the respondents who commented on the positive nature of their encounters with difference at work admitted that their relationships rarely translated into spaces beyond the workplace. This was attributed to a lack of shared interests beyond work related matters, or a consequence of living in different parts of the city: both of which are a product of cultural and socio-economic differences which produce a sorting of populations. In this sense the ability of workplace encounters to have a positive effect on wider social relations are limited or undone by structural inequalities and associated patterns of segregation.

I suppose I don't have much interaction with Muslims out of work because of my interests. The environment and the places I populate - where I would go - such as pubs and places like that and football. Because obviously they don't drink and their cultural differences, you wouldn't intermingle with them at those events (Male, 30-34, associate professional and technical occupations).

Moreover, whilst encounters with difference in the workplace can generate friendships between individuals who identify in very different ways, such relationships do not necessarily alter people’s attitudes towards the social groups they are perceived to represent. This accounts for some of the contradictions in our participants’ narratives in which they both gave examples of positive encounters with

difference whilst also articulating prejudices. For example, the respondent below when asked about what she had learnt from her encounters with difference in the workplace, initially answered in a positive way but later in the interview expressed blatant Islamophobia.

I just think you've got to have respect for everybody really and make opinions whether they're black, white or whatever. Everyone is individual, aren't they? We've all got the same blood. [Later she said] It's Muslims really with me that I have got a problem with...it is because they're Muslims and the ways that they think. But it isn't because they're a different colour to me. It's just their extreme views (Female, 45-49, intermediate occupations).

Likewise, the following respondent described how working in a diverse environment, becoming a union representative at work and undergoing equality and diversity training had instilled in him a positive attitude towards difference. Yet, later in his interviews it became apparent that this did not extend to all minorities. Rather, he expressed a xenophobic attitude towards immigrants, not narrated in terms of his own present employment position, but instead expressed through future orientated worries for his sons' work opportunities.

When I started work at a call centre... you had Muslim, Indian, homosexual, both men and women...it's the most cosmopolitan place of work...It's at work I've learnt more about religion and cultures. When I first started...the induction group that I was in...was quite a varied group and we had to work together...my team leader, she was gay... I mean they bring so many different things to the table... I got to find out stuff about different areas, different countries, different religions and backgrounds. And it was a positive thing for me... There's a lot of them now who are my friends and I spend a lot of time with a lot of people there...Now I want to experience as many different cultures as possible, I want to learn as much as there is out there... [EDIT] For me going to work and working with such a diverse set of people, that's what changed my views... because we're in a society where we've got to live together. [Later he said] Immigration - I'm frightened to death that my boys are not going to be able to get into whatever they want to get into...For me immigration's me biggest pet hate because we should start looking

after ourselves at home before we're looking after everybody else. (Male, 30-34, associate professional and technical occupations).

In this sense despite many accounts of positive encounters in the workplace, there was generally a failure to translate such affirmative experiences with individual colleagues and an acceptance of diversity at work, into attitudes towards difference and wider social relations in other spaces.

### **THE NATURE OF DIFFERENT WORKSPACES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL NORMATIVITIES**

Despite some of our respondents reporting positive encounters in the workplace in line with equality legislation, there were cases where others described discriminatory behaviour and prejudiced attitudes towards colleagues. This was often influenced by the informal and formal regulation of workspaces and the subsequent development of particular social normativities. For instance, the female respondent in the second extract below details her homophobic behaviour towards a colleague. This incident occurred despite the introduction of the *Employment Equality (sexual orientation)* regulation in 2003, which aimed to reduce such homophobic behaviour in the workplace or enable people's ability to challenge it (Colgan *et al.* 2007, 2009; Wright *et al.* 2006). This regulation is supported by the lesbian, gay and bisexual charity, *Stonewall*, who produce a series of good practice guides for employers containing practical ways to implement working practices. However, Richardson and Monro (2013) argue that whilst negative banter about lesbians and gay men and a refusal to provide services for, or work with, such groups are generally no longer considered socially acceptable in the workplace, homophobia – and we would add other prejudices such as racism, sexism and Islamophobia – still occur as these extracts from an audio-diary and an interview illustrate.

I was talking to my son in law yesterday. He's the one who is married to my eldest daughter and he works for the council and he works in IT. But one of the people who works in the office is a Muslim, we believe, woman, who wears a full burka. Talking to him about her, because I believe you said that I should even put things down that were to do with relations of mine as well. He basically totally ignores

her, won't speak to her, won't acknowledge her or anything, as do many of the people in his office. One of his main grudges is that he has to wear an identity badge with his photograph on and she doesn't, which to me is discrimination and to him is discrimination. I also feel that somebody like this obviously causes problems with work, because people don't converse with her, therefore some problems may not get solved because of this (Male, 65-69, retired).

I manage a gay man and I can cope with him but there is still limits and boundaries where I think, I can't cope with that anymore. If he's started to talk about what he does sexually a lot, then I would have to say, alright Sam I don't need to know that. I don't mind talking about heterosexual sex, but the gay sex - he does hint at it a bit but I think I struggle. [EDIT] We just have a little giggle about him because he does do some strange things. All the things he says and the dances that he does - he's quite camp you see... He knows how I feel about it (Female, 50-54, managerial and other professional occupations).

Interestingly, this respondent belongs to a minority group herself. She is of Black Caribbean descent. As in the case of one of the male respondents (quoted above) who is bi-sexual, her attitude towards sexual orientation at work illustrates that being a member of one particular group does not necessarily alter a person's prejudices towards other minority groups. This highlights the complexity of individuals' intersectional identities (Valentine 2007) and recognises that no one has a singular identity as, for example, just white or just Muslim. Rather we all have multiple identities (in terms of our class, age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity; as a parent, a partner, a member of a religious community or a particular occupation so on). Valentine (2007) argues that the complexity of our identifications allow for us to shift how we represent both self and other; to identify or dis-identify with other groups at particular moments in time or space; and for one particular form of identification to become salient or foregrounded at a particular moment or for one category to cancel out other categories. In reference to these respondents, despite identifying as bisexual or black they still dis-identify with other minority groups - it does not cause them to rethink their dispositions towards other minorities or to negotiate other 'differences' in more positive ways. Thus it is not possible to classify individuals into fixed categories as 'oppressed' or 'oppressor' as these respondents are in effect both.

Gender inequality in the workplace was also present in our research. Indeed our research suggests that while the development of equality legislation has contained the public expression of the most blatant forms of gender prejudice, sexism persists and is manifest in subtle ways. In a similar way to that described by Valentine *et al.* (2014), sexist ways of seeing are enacted when women are not present or instantiated through banter – in which women can also become complicit (as a means of survival or as a way of belonging) – which can make it more difficult to name and challenge. In this way, it is potentially becoming more difficult to see patterns of sexism in form and intent. The following quote supports this suggesting that the formal regulation of the Equality Act has had little impact for this respondent in terms of gender.

All the women that are known that are in construction do quite well. I mean one's rubbish, but a few of them are quite good... There's a girl who works for one of our consultancies on the outside and she gets a different reaction to the men as well. I don't know. It's really funny when a woman walks onsite, every man's head turns. She could be an awful looking woman and you forget, you see women all the time, it's just because one's onsite... (Male, 30-34, professional occupations).

As well as prejudice and discrimination, a further set of complex, everyday relationships exist between different groups of individuals in the workplace. Although people regularly shared the same physical space and cited examples of positive encounters with those different from themselves, these encounters were often banal. Respondents from the majority population also described what they perceived as self-segregation by minority groups at work. As a result they suggested that majority and minority groups were in effect together but apart in the workplace and gave accounts that emphasised the social, cultural and ethnic distance between different groups – as this extract from an audio diary illustrates

I've noticed that Asians do not tend to mix very well, with the Pakistanis and Indians often sitting in opposite sides of the room, i.e. our canteens. They ignore each other and often blame each other for minor problems, i.e. the Indians call the Pakistanis dirty. The Polish people call all dark-skinned people gypsies and

say they are not fit to work with, and they refuse to speak to them. (Male, 55-59, semi-routine and routine occupations).

This has echoes of common arguments that minority groups choose to self-segregate in particular neighbourhood communities or sectors of employment. Studies of migration have demonstrated how mobility can result in communities and social networks being rebuilt in new locations, often around shared cultural practices and religious organisations (Maynard *et al.* 2008; Moriarty and Butt 2004). Yet, while minority groups are often blamed for clustering together, as Phillips (2006) has argued in response to accusations that British Muslim communities self-segregate, the clustering of particular minority ethnic groups is commonly a product of structural inequalities rather than choice (see also Burholt 2004; Cook *et al.* 2011, p. 736; Musterd 2003), and majority communities also practise self-segregation (e.g. through white flight). The same is also likely to be true of workplaces with structural inequalities responsible for concentrating minorities into particular occupations or roles, and majority employees to be just as likely to be responsible for choosing to associate with others like themselves as members of minority groups.

## **GROUP RIGHTS**

The greatest tensions in the workplace were largely articulated through group rights. Whilst tensions were evident in relation to many forms of difference, they arose most significantly in relation to religion (cf. Hicks 2003, p. 24). Religious holidays and the provision of religious facilities in the workplace were often cited as contentious issues between Christians and Muslims, with questions raised about the special privileges that are perceived to be extended to religious groups (e.g. prayer rooms, leave for religious festivals). The following two respondents - who were quoted earlier for their positive attitude towards difference in the workplace – also described how tensions developed in their separate workplaces in relation to rights to religious holidays.

The only time we seem to get tension is round this time of year [Ramadan] and it's down to holidays. I had agreement between ourselves and Muslims where we won't book any time off during Eid, as long as you don't mind if we get first crack at Christmas... Again it's down to diversity in the workplace, but it works for us.



But now some of the Muslims book Christmas off because they'll be working in their parents' shops or whatever... there's a certain amount of resentment because obviously that time of year Muslims don't celebrate Christmas... It's hard if you can't get the time off and then it can cause problems (Male, 30-34, associate professional and technical occupations).

I mean even as a Christian, I've had to work over Easter before. I'm Catholic. We were down for working Easter Sunday. I couldn't turn around and say, well actually I need to take my child to church, it would be like, well why did you take the job? (Female, 25-29, sales and customer service occupations).

These religious tensions in the workplace were not confined to the issue of holidays. There is a consensus among scholars studying Muslims in the West that, through the growing religious demands of the Muslim minorities, a 'reconsideration of the role of religion in public policy has begun in Europe' (Klausen 2005, p. 107). Although there are no overarching laws implemented by the EU to ban or make obligatory the provision of prayer rooms or time for faith in the workplace or in educational institutions, certain countries like the United Kingdom have implemented regulations that accommodate these religious practices (Tatari 2009, p. 276). The *Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003* (Statutory Instrument 2003 No. 1660) require employers 'to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate religious practices at work. Muslims can now ask for prayer facilities, or for flexible working time so they can attend *Jummah* prayers. Yet, in the absence of such laws, most employers allow adequate time for prayers, and accommodate flexible working hours during Ramadan to enable Muslims to leave earlier in order to break fast. Within our research, several interviewees described religious conflicts that had arisen over the existence of Muslim prayer rooms in their workplaces.

I'm absolutely fine with it. As long as it doesn't interfere with the work and make people who are non-religious feel as though they're getting a raw deal, which I think could also happen. Because if I was working with a, Muslim girl, and she went and got ten minutes off every hour to go do her praying, I probably would be a bit annoyed about that, and go, where's my ten minutes? (Female, 45-49, intermediate occupations).

I know there were issues between - I think it might have been Muslim again - where they dedicated room for a prayer room. This stirred a little bit of unrest amongst other people. They think, well, hang on a minute. Why can't we have a room to do this, that and the other? Obviously, if one section sees somebody else getting something, they're not getting, it creates unrest (Male, 60-64, manager and senior officials).

The same pattern was evident in relation to interviewees' attitudes towards the rights of disabled people at work. There was a general acceptance of individuals with disabilities in the workplace, however hostility was expressed towards the provision of special facilities for disabled people as a group. Here, the same narrative that disabled people should not receive special privileges was repeated with little regard for the fact that changes, such as the provision of lifts or disabled toilet facilities, are necessary accommodations to enable disabled people to access the workplace.

If you're refurbishing an office and the codes have been changed - you've got to conform to the codes whatever they are. The only thing I would say is that disabled toilets - I think able-bodied people - are able-bodied people allowed to use disabled toilets? I think a disabled toilet should be a toilet that a disabled person can use but everybody should be able to use as well. The chances are if you've got three toilets in somewhere and one's disabled, the same ratio won't be for the able-bodied and disabled people.. if I need the toilet I'll use the disabled. If someone outside has to wait who's in a wheelchair then so be it (Male, 30-34, professional occupations).

These examples demonstrate that the social practice of encountering 'others', like integration, requires an element of co-operation on the part of host communities or majority (Castles *et al.* 2002). Positive relations, can only be fostered if integration is approached as a two-way process in which there is some renegotiation of identity by both hosts and newcomers (Korac 2003; Phillimore 2012; Phillimore and Goodson 2008; Spencer and Cooper 2006). Yet, majority interviewees rarely recognised their own responsibility to change their behaviour or practices in order to accommodate minority groups in the workplace; and they were hostile to the idea that minorities

should receive what is perceived as 'special' or privileged treatment. Rather minority groups were accepted in the workplace only on the proviso that their presence did not impact on majority employees' and their perceived 'rights' or 'norms'.

Moreover, some interviewees argued that the distribution of rights and the balance of power in the workplace has swung too far in favour of minorities, particularly since the formal regulations of diversity and equality measures are now used to assess personal and institutional performance (Ahmed 2007). This they claimed has left them fearful of being accused of discriminating against minority co-workers and/ or being subject to grievance procedures and disciplinary tribunals for unintentionally saying or doing the wrong thing.

I think being a manager and having managed people from an Asian background, it's very strange... because it's like this unspoken feeling leaving me with the feeling that they feel they're entitled to whatever they ask for... Sometimes I do feel a little bit uneasy. Like when I enter into something as serious as not coming to work on time, or your performance, or whatever, I feel like I do have to dot every I and cross every T. For some reason I just feel like it has to be more perfect than if I go into it with a white British person (Female, 45-49, intermediate occupations).

In this sense, interviewees often focused on being seen to do the right thing to comply with the law in the workplace yet admitted their personal negative attitudes towards difference remained unchanged (see also Monro and Richardson 2012). Rather they understood it was only possible to express their personal attitudes and values in spaces outside the workplace perceived as less regulated by equality laws where they trusted their views might be shared by others.

In the above quote, the respondent discusses feeling 'uneasy' managing Asian colleagues, which may be due to a sense of having to do the right thing. However, it could also be due to tensions between employees from different minority groups.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is growing body of literature on the potential of encounters across difference to promote ‘good relations’ and reduce prejudice (e.g. Amin 2002; Valentine 2008; Bridge and Watson 2002). Workplaces are an important site for such encounters, both because they are becoming increasingly diverse as a result of demographic changes but also because organisations are increasingly aware of the value of diversity to their businesses and of their legal obligations in relation to contemporary equality legislation. Likewise, workers are more aware than ever of equality and diversity in the workplace, but how they choose to respond to this is complex.

Workplaces have the potential to promote meaningful encounters and did so in some cases featured in our research. Certain experiences are supportive of people learning to ‘live with, perhaps even value difference’ (Amin 2006, p. 1013). First, interviewees described the accident of proximity to others different from themselves as producing interactions which led to the development of relationships at work, and in some cases friendships, across difference. Second, the nature of work itself – such as collaborating with others towards a common goal, and the experience of intergroup cooperation on work tasks – had also facilitated positive social relationships across difference. Yet these narratives of positive encounters with difference were often discussed in relation to relatively banal interactions with individuals, and did not always translate into changing the interviewees’ attitudes towards minority groups as a whole. Neither did such positive encounters necessarily translate beyond the workplace into other spaces of everyday life (Valentine, 2008) because wider structural inequalities (e.g. in housing markets) limited the opportunities for these relationships to be maintained or extended. Nonetheless, the potential for positive relationships to be developed at work suggests more could be done by employers and training organisations to build on such individual encounters in order to attempt to scale them up or translate them more effectively.

However, while our research suggests that the workplace is a potential site of ‘meaningful encounter’ with difference where there is perceived to be a demographic balance but either a lack of diversity or a perception of too much diversity this can generate tensions and lead individuals to experience feelings of discrimination or exclusion. In particular, majority interviewees rarely recognised their own

responsibility to change their behaviour or practices in order to accommodate minority groups in the workplace; and they were hostile to the idea that minorities should receive what is perceived as ‘special’ or privileged treatment. Rather where the presence of ‘difference’ necessitated any change to ‘norms’ in the workplace this was perceived as a threat to the rights, and implicitly as a consequence the power of majority employees. This is a fundamental challenge to workplace diversity and suggests the need for more effective equality and diversity training. This is required to embed understandings of difference and to explain why it matters that minority groups’ rights are respected and their needs accommodated in the workforce if the workplace is to become a truly meaningful site of encounters.

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### **NOTES:**

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<sup>1</sup> Attitudes were measure with the commonly used thermometer question: *Please rate how you feel about them on a thermometer that runs from zero to a hundred degrees. The higher the number, the warmer or more favourable you feel towards that group. The lower the number, the colder or less favourable you feel towards that group.* Ethnic prejudice indicator was computed as a mean of attitudes towards Muslim, Black people, refugees and asylum seekers, Jewish people and Roma people; sexual prejudice – a mean of attitudes towards gay and lesbian people and transsexuals, disabilism – attitudes towards disabled people.

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