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#### **Published paper**

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# Biographical Narratives of Encounter: The Significance of Mobility and Emplacement in Shaping Attitudes towards Difference

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## Abstract

This paper is located within work in urban studies about the significance of contact with difference as a means for reducing prejudice and achieving social change. Recent approaches, influenced by theories of affect, have emphasised non-conscious everyday negotiations of difference in the city. In this paper it is argued that such approaches lose sight of the significance of the subject: of the reflective judgements of 'others' made by individuals; of our ability to make decisions around the control of our feelings and identifications; and of the significance of personal pasts and collective histories in shaping the ways we perceive and react to encounters. Rather, this paper uses a biographical approach focusing on interviewees' narratives of encounter. Through its attention to processes of mobility and emplacement, it contributes to debates about when contact with difference matters by highlighting the importance of everyday social normativities in the production of moral dispositions.

**Keywords:** emplacement, Europe, Geography, mobility, social group

## Introduction

Difference is a hallmark of contemporary cities. The size and density of urban populations mean that they are sites of encounter where all different sorts of people are brought together. Hence the question of how we develop the capacity to live with

difference and overcome intolerance is increasingly at the heart of attempts to understand urban life. The contact hypothesis is a foundational theory for addressing and reducing prejudice. It originates from the work of Gordon Allport who recognised

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the potential of bringing people from various groups together in ways that might develop mutual concern and respect. Allport (1954) identified optimum conditions for such contact between groups to be effective including: the necessity for participants to have a sense of equal status and a common purpose or activity; for the engagement to be realistic rather than artificial; as well as for such encounters to have the sustained support of the wider community (including authorities, law or custom) within which they occur. Subsequent research in social psychology (for example, Pettigrew, 1998) has further explored how positive social relations might be achieved. This body of research has suggested that contact works by enabling people to learn about 'others' which can change negative or stereotypical views; by generating friendships across social difference; and by encouraging majority groups to reappraise their social 'norms' and to be more understanding and inclusive of minorities. It has continued to be important in social psychology despite being criticised for focusing on prejudice primarily as antipathy and consequently not recognising it is manifest in qualitatively different forms (Dovidio *et al.*, 2005) and for neither recognising the complexity of individuals' intersectional identities, nor the potential for intolerance within/between minority as well as majority communities (Valentine, 2010).

Although relatively neglected in urban studies, geography and sociology the significance of 'contact' in fostering interethnic relations has begun to emerge in recent thinking about community cohesion, cosmopolitanism and geographies of encounter. Most notably, Amin's (2002) reflections on strategies for community cohesion—following racial tensions and violence in UK cities at the turn of the millennium—resonate with Allport's contact hypothesis. He ascribes managed interactions between

different ethnic groups, predicated on exchange around common interests, with the potential to produce moments of cultural destabilisation that allow participants to establish new intercultural understandings. Examples of what Amin terms 'micro-publics'—might include urban sites such as libraries, community centres and allotments.

Beyond such work about specific sites of managed interactions between groups, the basic premise that encounters offer the possibility for new understandings and social change to occur is evident in wider contemporary writing about the city. Here, a strand of interdisciplinary research on urban encounters has highlighted the potential for everyday contact in public spaces of multicultural cities (for example, cafes, markets, parks and public transport) to produce cosmopolitan sensibilities and competencies as a by-product of socially diverse individuals rubbing along together as they go about their normal lives (Laurier and Philo, 2006; Sandercock, 1998; Watson, 2009). It has its roots in a long tradition of social science scholarship about 'everyday life' including the seminal work of Elias (2000) on civility and Goffman (1967) on dramaturgy.

Unlike managed interactions between groups, the pre-conditions for Allport's contact hypothesis are rarely met in everyday urban encounters between individuals. Recent work has begun to trouble assumptions that banal everyday contact and informal acts of care or civility in urban public space necessarily equate with respect for difference to suggest that individuals can separate out their moral beliefs (for example, in terms of our shared understandings of how we should live, who is good or bad, how we should treat others/be treated by them) from their personal conduct (Watson, 2006; Valentine, 2008). For example, research with religious groups about their attitudes towards homosexuality has demonstrated

that the 'what is' (i.e. personal experience of friendship) for both heterosexual and lesbian and gay people of faith is prioritised over theological perspectives of 'what ought to be' (religious belief that homosexuality is a sin/abomination) (Valentine and Waite, 2012). And in a study of urban encounters between residents who are White and immigrants of colour in small US towns Leitner (2012) observes that White residents expressed fears, annoyance and discomfort associated with difference as well as moments of reflection and change.

Such work has also begun to acknowledge that positive experiences of encounter in one spatial context may not generalise or carry over into others (Leitner, 2012; Valentine, 2008; Valentine and Sadgrove, 2012). It has questioned the primary focus on urban public spaces as sites of encounter, calling for more attention to be paid to the potential significance of both 'private' and institutional spaces where individuals' understandings of difference are negotiated and contested (Hemming, 2011; Valentine and Sadgrove, 2012) as well as recognising that contact zones are not only embodied relationships in specific time-spaces but are also metaphorical; part of our socio-spatial imaginaries (Yeoh and Willis, 2005). Indeed, there has been a more general neglect of how individuals approach and experience encounters and their subjective reflections on the meaning of such moments for them. Rather, the influence of the 'affective turn' in geography in particular, has focused attention on the orientation of bodies towards or away from each other to produce particular affective atmospheres in a given moment. This has been primarily understood through observational research of the habitual non-conscious performances and micro socialities of everyday negotiations of difference in the city (for example, Laurier and Philo, 2006; Wilson, 2011).

Yet, such approaches lose sight of the significance of the subject: of the reflective judgements of 'others' made by individuals; of our ability to make decisions or choices around the control of our feelings, relationships and identifications; of the significance of personal pasts and the collective histories of the communities within which we are embedded in shaping the ways that different individuals perceive and react to encounters; and of the potential for particular contacts with difference to become 'fateful moments' (Giddens, 1991) that produce an intentional recasting of the self in the future or to fail to endure beyond the moment. Swanton's (2010) research in a northern UK mill town, examining how social differentiation is performed through assemblages of bodies, things and spaces, has suggested that history matters and more precisely that raced memories and affects accumulate. He argues that

newspaper stories, past experiences, gossip, micro-political baggage and rumour are sedimented in layers of virtual memory immanent to each moment of encounter (Swanton, 2010, p. 459).

Yet, in making this argument, Swanton draws on fragments of a range of reconstructed events retold in informal interviews, conversations and the media rather than providing an in-depth examination of individuals' personal histories and the ways that memories of particular encounters shape values and attitudes.

This paper responds to these criticisms by adopting a biographical approach to explore the spatial and temporal contexts and dynamics through which individuals' prejudices are developed, challenged or interrupted

Perception is never a mere contact of the mind with the object present; it is impregnated with memory images which complete it as they interpret it (Bergson, 1911, p. 170).

Specifically, we argue that, contrary to current orthodoxies which read encounters off momentary bodily orientations, encounters with and across difference can only be understood when analysed within the context of an individual's life-story. We argue that the strength of biographical narrative methods is the dynamism of memory in making temporal connections (see also Valentine and Sadgrove, 2012). It is the biographical past—memories, associations, histories, experiences—that contributes to orientating bodies in the present. How encounters with difference are shaped by, and shape, attitudes towards the other must be contextualised within a biographical understanding of what it is that individuals carry from their pasts into the moment of encounter and their reflective judgements of the meaning of these experiences.

The past 20 years have witnessed a proliferation of scholarly attention to the role of biographical narrative methods in the social sciences (see Peacock and Holland, 1993; Somers, 1994). Inspired by the 20th-century shift in attention to narrative form within the humanities, social science work has moved beyond concerns with the representational aspects of narrative and narrativity to reconceptualise them as

Concepts of social epistemology and social ontology [which] posit that it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand and make sense of the social worlds, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities ... all of us come to *be* who we *are* ... by being located or locating ourselves in social narratives *rarely of our own making* (Somers, 1994, p. 606).

Narratives, as conceived by Somers, become ways of linking social ontology with the social constitution of identity by revealing something of the complex and shifting processes through which individuals narrate

themselves, and their experiences in relation to the multiple (structural) narratives provided by society. Narratives, it is argued, constitute identity by requiring that individuals interpret themselves through particular stories that construct racialised, gendered and classed subjects. Yet equally, the telling of stories and use of narrative methods by individuals allows for counter-narratives to emerge and be articulated—evidencing the ways in which individual biographies might both antagonise or invoke structural narratives at different points and for different ends. Methodologically, this rendering of individual respondents as both agents and subjects provides unique evidence of the complex tensions and frustrations which, we argue, can be seen to shape prejudicial attitudes towards others.

Biographical narrative interviews and oral histories are perceived as particularly useful in enhancing understandings about the situated and relational nature of people's identities, attitudes and values (Somers, 1994). Within the context of a study on prejudice, biographical methods provide a unique type of evidence as to when and where prejudices are shaped, reinforced and interrupted. By paying attention to individual life-stories, we can better understand how prejudices unfold over time, when and how they become entrenched and where and why they are destabilised.

This analytical process necessitates an engagement with individuals' understandings of their relationship to place. Material spaces matter because they bring people together in a location where abstract discourses and positionings in diffuse social networks become outworked as tangible, sedimented social relations through collective imaginaries and the production of community normativities (unspoken rules/codes of behaviour) and forms of regulation. Here, we use the term *emplacement* to describe the way in which individuals

narrate their values and attitudes (past, present and sometimes future) as a product of such solidified configurations.

At the same time, we also reflect on individuals' accounts of their mobility (literal and metaphorical) when they have encountered different normativities and understand their moral dispositions to have changed. The telling of a biographical narrative allows access to the ways in which certain social performances take precedence over others at different times and in different places/spaces. Accounts of these shifting social performances often emerge as people narrate changes in their contexts. Examples include moving to a new workplace, moving to a new country or encountering new institutional frameworks—such as by entering further education. Each of these experiences of physical and/or social mobility draws people into contact with new attitudes, values and methods of discursive policing—such as equality and diversity legislation or socio-cultural norms deemed to be 'acceptable'. Whilst this may not enable us to posit the dissolving of prejudices, such accounts do reveal important evidence about the impact of discursive policing.

The proliferation of writing on the challenges and limitations of narrative methods (for example, the extent to which rules about 'acceptable' stories are culturally dictated and can encourage closed or coherent narratives; the fact that narratives are accounts of what people say they do, not evidence of their actual practices and problems of omissions from life-stories) illuminates the profound challenges of interpreting and analysing life-story evidence. Whilst we recognise these limitations (see also Sandelowski, 1991), we also argue that life-story methods allow new insights into how individuals' moral values and attitudes towards difference change to produce new subjectivities and new social performances around difference. In adopting this

approach, we understand narrative interviews to be a process of meaning making, a window on the dynamics of respondents' experiences and emotional lives, rather than a presumed reality (Bruner, 1990). We acknowledge that how the self is narrated may differ according to the specific performative encounter between a given respondent and interviewer at the particular moment and in the specific situational context of the interview. The interviewer, in other words, is not merely the passive recipient of the narrative but an active, authorial agent. Likewise, a self that is produced from an interview is a product of the narration, not the source of it. We therefore follow Peacock and Holland (1993) in using the term life-story to describe this research process because it does not imply that the narration is 'truth' or 'fact' but rather communicates the way that interviews are precarious sense-making devices that can help to make experiences intelligible (Weick, 1995).

The research upon which this paper is based involved 60 individual case studies ( $n = 120$  interviews) as part a European Research Council funded research programme, *Living with Difference*. Each case comprises a time-line, a life-story interview, an audio diary of everyday encounters, a semi-structured interview about attitudes towards difference and an interview reflecting on the emerging findings. Here, we are interested in multiple forms of social differentiation (gender, age, race, class, sexual orientation, disability, religion and belief, etc.) in contrast to the literature around prejudice/encounters which has a tendency primarily to view these issues through the lens of race and racism. The informants were recruited from amongst respondents to a survey about prejudice in Leeds, UK (see Piekut *et al.*, 2012). They were sampled to include those from a range of social backgrounds (in terms of socioeconomic 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.

In response to criticisms that research about prejudice commonly focuses on the attitudes of the majority population, here we draw on the life-stories of two informants, both currently resident in Leeds: first, a White, working-class man in his 30s (Craig); and, in the following section, a Muslim woman of Pakistani origin in her 40s (Amirah). Both sections focus on key examples of meaningful 'contact with difference' that were identified by the interviewees which they narrate as having an affect in shaping their understandings of, and attitudes towards, 'difference'. We draw on their self-reflections about how they have made choices around the control of their feelings, self-identifications and approaches to future relationships, as well as our own readings of slippages and contradictions in their accounts. All the quotations included in this paper are verbatim. Ellipsis dots are used to indicate minor edits that have been made to clarify the readability of quotations. Information is sometimes added in square brackets to clarify to what the interviewee is referring (i.e. from the preceding conversation) when this is not explicit in the specific extract quoted. The word [edit] is used to signify that a significant section of text has been removed. The names attributed to speakers are pseudonyms.

### **Craig: A Narrative of Attitudes towards Minority Ethnic Groups**

Craig recounts his childhood as one characterised by social, emotional and material disadvantage. Following the death of his

father when he was a child and his mother's remarriage to an abusive new partner, he found himself taking premature responsibility for caring for his younger siblings and step-siblings.

Craig grew up on an economically marginalised housing estate in Leeds. The urban community he was emplaced within, like many poor White neighbourhoods, was characterised by a culture of prejudice and intolerance towards minorities as a defensive desire to maintain local culture, tradition and identity in the face of processes of counter-modernisation. It has long been an active recruiting group for the right-wing, anti-immigration groups such as the British National Party. During Craig's youth, this antagonism towards 'minorities' was also reflected in the local football team which in the 1970s and 1980s was known for the aggressive nature of the team's style of play on the pitch as well as the hyper-masculinity and racially targeted hooliganism of its fans.

Craig's first memories of encountering racial difference were at school and at football matches with his friends. As the quotation (see later) implies, he was part of a dominant peer group that was racist. The anti-school culture of resistance he describes resonates with Willis' (1977) *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. In this seminal study, Willis argued that, having observed their own parents' working in menial jobs, young men from working-class communities anticipate futures circumscribed by the same limited employment opportunities and so come to regard education as both irrelevant and often a humiliating experience. As a consequence, they produce an anti-school, hyper-masculine culture of resistance in which membership of, and status within, the peer group is more important to their self-worth and sense of identity than academic achievement. Their

subsequent educational failure ensures that they unintentionally reproduce their class position. In Craig's case, the peer culture of toughness he was emplaced within mobilised aggression towards minorities inside and outside the classroom, reflecting processes of othering and scapegoating evident in the adult community. His loyalty to, and participation in, his peer group gave him emotional release and a sense of identity and belonging in a wider context of insecurity and injustice. In this sense, Craig's racism might be understood as a pre-reflexive, routine orientation to the world produced through his embodied experiences of everyday life. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1990) concept of *habitus*—internalised dispositions that are the product of socialisation—Sayer (2005) argues that this concept can be used to address ethical matters, observing that individuals also have instant moral responses (including emotions such as anger, bitterness, compassion, etc.) towards others/situations prior to reflection

There were a lot of racism around school ... I mean the lads I were at school with, it were all football-related and they were United fans ... so there was a lot of violence and racism in the '70s which they'd been brought up in that environment all their lives ... and it carried on over into school. I mean I remember we had a teacher Mr Pinder ... and he were actually Indian. The guys in our science class they always used to just rip into him and call him Paki and things like that. And because I wanted to be in with the in-crowd ... you had to do it. Racism on the terraces, violence, it were all there ... it's fine, it's the norm, everybody's doing it ... I enjoyed it, it gave me an outlet ... you know, I'd built up all this aggression ... I were able to be myself and spill out ... I had to follow what everyone else was doing [edit]. The BNP [British National Party] ... were posting literature through the door. And if they saw you in the

street they'd talk to you ask you to go to meetings and things like that.

Yet, in acknowledging the significance of Craig's early moral disposition towards 'others' as a product of his emplacement in a particular community, this is not to suggest that such early experiences are deterministic and necessarily orientate future actions. Rather, individuals can reflect on their own lives and encounters and choose to change or react to wider urban social relations in new ways such that they produce and embody new dispositions. For Craig, the literal and social mobility of gaining employment in a call-centre—a mundane cosmopolitan environment—brought him into contact with colleagues who were lesbian and gay and from different ethnic, and religious backgrounds, which caused him to reflect intentionally on his encounters with, and attitudes towards, 'difference'. Allport (1954) himself identified the workplace as providing the optimum characteristics for his contact hypothesis to be successful because it brings different people together around a shared activity in a context where such encounters have the sustained support of the institution in which they occur. His research (and subsequent studies) has shown that such contact works because individuals learn about difference which corrects any negative views or stereotypes they hold; it can generate affective ties such as friendships and produce attitudinal change by causing individuals to be self-reflective about their understanding of their own and others' place in the world. As Craig describes, his employment changed his usage of space, emplacing him in a new context populated by different people and governed by different normativities. Indeed, in his new employment, he became a trade union representative and undertook equality and diversity training. (See Wilson, 2013, for an account of how diversity



workshops which challenge prejudicial attitudes can produce positive change.) It also represented a movement across social space that enabled him to 'become someone else' as he reflected on his own social/ethical practices and changed his moral disposition towards 'others'.

When I started work at a call centre ... the people that worked [there] ... you had Muslim, Indian, homosexual, both men and women ... it's the most cosmopolitan place of work because its in the city centre ... 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. Then there were two Muslim girls and a Muslim boy and then there were a couple of Indians, and one half-cast [*sic*] lad and me and a White girl ... We were the minority within our team ... I mean they bring so many different things to the table ... I got to find out stuff about different countries, different religions and backgrounds. And it was a positive thing for me ... I could come home and I could pass it onto my kids ... There's a lot of them now who are my friends ... Now I want to experience as many different cultures as possible, I want to learn as much as there is out there ... I've actually got a book on how to teach yourself Urdu ... I think it would be a good language to learn going forward ... working in the job I work in, we deal with places like Bangalore and Chennai so we speak to a lot of people who are Urdu speaking. [edit] For me going to work and working with such a diverse set of people, that's what changed my views ... It's got me to where I am now from where I was because we're in a society where we've got to live together ... I think its made me a better person working with people from different backgrounds, nationalities and religions.

Yet, Craig's account is not a simple linear narrative of transformation from holding prejudiced views to a more progressive or cosmopolitan disposition. Rather, over the course of the multiple stages of the case study research, Craig expressed a concern that, despite experiencing the privilege of being White, middle-aged and male, he himself experienced prejudice. Recalling being passed over for a job because he has tattoos and piercings, Craig articulated a narrative of injustice about the rights and protection afforded to minority groups compared with what he perceives to be his own vulnerability to discrimination and his own lack of representation from political or cultural organisations. It is a narrative of being misrecognised or disrespected that has its roots in his emplaced class identity.

I've got piercings and tattoos and things like that. So I went to drop off some appraisal documents ... for the lady who were doing the interview. I went to the interview, didn't get the job, when I asked for feedback and she actually said to me 'I didn't want to interview you because of the way you looked' ... I think not just equality laws but a lot of laws have gone too far ... for me I have nothing—if I'm getting victimised at work basically all I can do is raise a grievance for harassment but there's no specific grounds, no specific terms. Whereas for a woman you've got sexism, somebody of an ethnic minority you have got colour, they've also got religious background that you can go on. I'm just out there on a limb and it's me that's helping keep this country ticking over. It's me that goes to work everyday to make a living. I've no protection within work ... There is no ism. I'm 34, White, middle-aged, working class. I've nothing when you look at it that way. There's no protection for us ... You're doing your damn best for your wife and your kids and to keep the country going by going to work and paying taxes but you feel like you're being shit on from a

great height. It's hard sometimes for us because we're just the forgotten minority.

Although, Craig represents himself as having no 'ism', he is in effect describing class prejudice that resonates with his emplaced childhood experience of growing up in a disadvantaged neighbourhood and which echoes previous accounts of White working-class urban communities (for example, Hewitt, 2005) in which perceptions of both unfairness and cultural injustice have been a response to rapid processes of detraditionalisation and individualisation in the context of new modernity. Notably, the global demand for flexible labour and the impact of the contemporary financial crisis have reverberated through the employment structure producing rising levels of redundancy, an increased emphasis on short-term contracts and part-time work which in turn have created chronic job insecurity. Hence, the claim that White Britons are now second-class citizens in their own country is a discourse used by the British National Party to recruit in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Ford and Goodwin, 2010).

Here, Craig's feelings of ontological insecurity in a context of economic uncertainty are not explicitly narrated in terms of race as they were expressed during his past, perhaps mirroring the evidence of other studies which suggest that minority ethnic groups are now increasingly accepted as part of a multicultural society (for example, Finney and Peach, 2004). Rather, 'the others' that he perceives to threaten his way of life in the present are narrated in more abstract terms as immigrants, including White migrants from eastern Europe, as well as asylum-seekers who are perceived to receive preferential treatment compared with native Britons. In this sense, the racism of his youth is replaced by a more xenophobic fear of strangers. In his account, Craig represents

immigrants as a needy group who are receiving welfare support despite the fact many come with the specific intention to work; at the same time, he also blames their perceived dependency for encouraging British young people to choose a life of welfare benefits over employment. His argument implicitly mobilises a Protestant work ethic which dates back to the first age of industrial capitalism. Sennett (2003) argues that it was in this period that the moral value of work and the consequent fear of being unproductive and dependent became ingrained in society. Subsequently, the characterisation of those who do not or who are unable to work in paid employment, as socially and morally separate from the hard-working majority population, has become a recurrent public discourse in the UK (Valentine and Harris, under review).

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. With the riots, when they were saying it's because they wanted to lash out at the police, it's not. It's because you're a lazy ass and you want everything given to you ... the Government's modelled that for our youth because they see immigrants coming in and getting the houses, the social handouts so they think well if they can do it why can't I do it ... It's like the people that are on benefits, to me, they've got more disposable income than I have because I pay my mortgage, my council tax, my rates ... We're looking for somebody to blame ... The economic downturn we're blaming immigrants.

Moreover, Craig is currently in a good job. His xenophobia is not therefore narrated in terms of his own present employment position, but rather is expressed through

future-orientated worries for his sons. Children and childhood are commonly mobilised as symbols or emblems of the future (Bingham *et al.*, 1999). By evoking them in this way, Craig is implicitly expressing a fear of a loss of privilege (as White and male) in competition with 'strangers' and his own sense of powerlessness in a context of unprecedented mobility and urban social change. This could perhaps be read as what Allport (1954) terms 'attitude regression' where individuals slip back into previous ways of thinking over time. However, Craig has a genuine commitment to multiculturalism and embracing other ways of living. He does not see the connection between the colleagues he has everyday contact with at work (some of whom are first- or second-generation immigrants to the UK) and the abstract metaphorical 'folk devil'—the immigrant—that troubles his socio-spatial imagination. Immigrants in his account are largely disembodied and unacculturated. They are framed by Craig entirely in relation to their perceived dependency and his perception of himself as deserving/needing, but not receiving support. In this sense, internalised economic insecurities and a feeling of injustice from Craig's past emplacement haunt his perceptions of his own and his children's futures. While he has intentionally reflected on, and changed his past attitude towards, minority ethnic groups as a consequence of his socioeconomic mobility (i.e. gaining a job) and concomitant positive encounters in the workplace, fear and resentment generated by a narrative of past and future economic insecurity harbour a xenophobia that he directs at an abstract target.

### **Amirah: A Narrative of Attitudes towards Disability and Sexual Orientation**

Amirah was born and grew up in Pakistan 'not too poor, not too rich' in what she

describes as a fairly stratified society on the basis of occupation. Her father, a businessman with his own shop, had fought for the British in World War II, an exposure which, according to Amirah, made him value education and he encouraged his daughters to go to university. Pakistan is a profoundly religious society in which ultimately law and rights and meaning in life are widely believed to derive from Allah. Children are thought to be born not so much as individuals with personal rights, but as part of an extended family network within a wider community of mutual duty and obligation. Amirah was raised in Islam, which she describes as 'very important' to understanding the family, the ways in which relationships between men and women are constructed and managed, and in shaping her attitudes and values

there used to be mosque people like mullahs and things ... you felt like they're the most right people because they've got the knowledge, like priests you can say. So you actually believe whatever they are saying ... They can tell you something and you thought because they're in the mosque they have to be right. That's all they do, this is their job, they're reading books and they're talking about something, it's got to be right.

In the context of her emplaced childhood, Amirah's first memories of encounters with difference were in an intrafamilial context as her older sister had a physical impairment as a consequence of having polio. Yet, despite this intimate contact with 'difference', Amirah narrates herself as having little empathy for disabled people during her childhood and early adulthood. She attributes this both to the cultural belief systems of the community in which she was raised and to her personal familial relationships.

The concept of disability is not evident in the Qur'an, although there is a theoretical

equality of all before Allah, and the Qur'an calls on Muslims to recognise the disadvantages and to improve their circumstances (Maysaa *et al.*, 2012; Miles, 1983). However, a lack of awareness and education about disability among the general public (particularly associated with high levels of illiteracy) means that misconceptions and inconsiderate attitudes are commonplace in Pakistan (Miles, 1983). Indeed, disability is popularly seen as a curse or punishment from Allah and is sometimes associated with invasion by an evil spirit. During the 1980s–1990s, the UN Decade of the Disabled, General Zia-ul-Haq, who had a daughter with multiple disabilities, sought to improve the welfare of disabled children by establishing special education centres in Pakistan. However, most services for those with disabilities are located in urban areas with little or no provision for those in remote areas. As a result, many disabled people live in poor conditions with a lack of access to basic needs or rehabilitation services, with the provision of support and care perceived as a wider community duty and obligation, rather than being an individual right laid down by the state.

Amirah believes that the negative attitude towards disability she held during her early adulthood was informed by the treatment of her older sister in their community where, even within their extended family, her sister was not considered acceptable for an arranged marriage. In seminal work on stigma, Goffman (1963) famously argued that this is a process by which 'the reaction of others spoils normal identities'. For Amirah, the stigma of her sister's disability also threatened her own identity. In this sense, like Craig's racism, Amirah's disability represents a pre-reflexive, routine orientation to the world produced through her everyday lived experience in a specific emplaced context governed by particular social and cultural normativities.

We don't do things [in Pakistan] that we do here [UK] ... It's the parents who normally choose and decide and what's happening and things ... .My parents tried a lot [to find a husband for her disabled sister]. My dad asked around and things. Then people come home as well and talk to her and things and they never come back second time. They came one time and after meeting her they didn't want to go ahead ... It's just society doesn't accept these things.

Amirah's negative disposition towards disability was further compounded by sibling jealousy within the family. She recalls that her sister was favoured by her mother because of her perceived vulnerability, and her consequent envy of the closeness of their relationship further tempered her attitude towards disability. In this sense, Amirah's narrates her reaction to her disabled sister as a form of incipient prejudice: a resentment towards an 'innocent' person who is perceived to be more privileged—in this case in terms of maternal love (Allport, 1954). By illogically blaming her sister for her personal sense of emotional deprivation, Amirah recognises that she projected her sense of resentment onto the group that her sister represented: disabled people.

When Amirah was 21 she had an arranged marriage and moved from Pakistan to live with her husband's family in the UK. She gave birth to a son with severe learning disabilities who relies on Amirah for very basic levels of care. Indeed, she is concerned that he will never be able to live independently. Being a mother to a child with special needs challenged Amirah's received attitudes towards disability. In this sense, the birth of her son was akin to Giddens' (1991, p. 113) notion of a "fateful moment"—"a phase at which things are wrenched out of joint" and where individuals are called on to reflect on their lives and take decisions that are consequential for



Negotiating educational and social provision for her son brought Amirah into contact with a wider range of people and institutions than she would have otherwise encountered in her daily life. One of those whom Amirah describes as a huge support is the head teacher at his school. When the teacher required an operation, Amirah went to see her in hospital. During her visit she read a 'get well soon card' and in doing so, unintentionally discovered that the teacher is a lesbian.

Initially, Amirah was surprised and upset given that in her faith (as in many others) homosexuality is understood to be unnatural, sinful and more specifically a 'Western' disease that threatens the religiously prescribed natural order (notwithstanding that some Imams have started to question what sexual practices are forbidden and how strictly these are regulated and publications are beginning to emerge that challenge traditional interpretations of Islamic texts; see Yip, 2005).

I see people as their personality. I don't bother about what they're doing in their personal life, that's my personal point of view. I don't approve it, I wouldn't approve it, if somebody asked my opinion I will tell them this is wrong, you're not supposed to do that. But—it's their business, it's not your business ... that's from Islamic principles, you don't put your nose everywhere. Because our head teacher at school, who actually helped me a lot with my son's statement she was really nice ... she was a lesbian, that didn't bother me. ... The first time I knew and I was really surprised and shocked. But after a while it went away because she kept that totally away from the school. She was a great person, she lifted up the school, she put a lot of effort into school with the children and education-wise ... that was a really good thing. You shouldn't be put off by what she's doing in her personal life.

Because of the high regard in which Amirah holds the teacher as a professional, she consciously worked to find space within her interpretation of Islam to accommodate this knowledge and accept her as an individual. She did this by compartmentalising sexuality as a privatised rather than a public practice, observing that what occurs within the home is not the concern of Islam, rather stating that homosexuality is only problematic when it is damaging to wider community or social relationships (citing the example of a gay man who abused children in the community and her hostility towards gay marriage and adoption). In this sense, while Amirah narrates the intimate contact of mothering a disabled child as the cause of a change in her attitude towards all disabled people, positive contact with this lesbian teacher has not brought a similar transformation in her attitude towards lesbians and gay men as a social group. She still holds a negative attitude towards homosexuality and continues to be opposed to various forms of equality on the grounds of sexual orientation. Rather, she has in effect decategorised the head teacher, treating her as an individual such that her sexuality is given no wider salience

For example about the gays. I think it's wrong. It shouldn't—especially about these gay marriages—it shouldn't be allowed. They're allowed to adopt kids and have kids. It won't be a good impression on kids when they grow up. They'll be wondering why I've got two dads and why I've got two mums, and why I don't have a mum and dad and things. That's no good.

In this way, Amirah's account demonstrates that, while we can choose how we manage our feelings in relation to the reflective judgements we make about other individuals with whom we have contact in everyday life, for such contact to change our



attitudes towards the group they represent we must rethink our routine emplacements or orientation to the world. This requires a willingness to embrace new wider social normativities and to develop new moral dispositions rather than merely to stretch containing narratives in an elastic way to accommodate exceptional individuals.

### **Reflections on Narratives of Encounter: The Significance of Mobility and Emplacement**

Debates in urban studies about prejudice reduction, social cohesion and more recently cosmopolitanism have focused on the significance of contact in bringing people together. In particular, the emphasis of recent work has been on the use of observational techniques to study the urban sites of encounter where such destabilisation and transformations are presumed to take place. However, we have argued in this paper that such approaches lose sight of the significance of the subject: of the reflective judgements of 'others' made by individuals and the relevance of personal pasts and the collective histories of the communities within which we are emplaced in shaping the meaningfulness and durability (or not) of specific encounters. Rather, we argue that narrative stories provide an important method to understand when and why contact makes a difference.

We have therefore adopted a biographical approach to explore the spatial and temporal contexts in which individuals' prejudices are developed, challenged or interrupted. In doing so, we have focused on particular examples of meaningful contact that were identified by two interviewees as having an affect on their understandings of, and attitudes towards, 'difference': exploring their self-reflections about how they made choices around the control of their feelings, self-

identifications and approaches to future relationships; as well as our own readings of their accounts. These were neither managed contact (for example, organised community events), nor examples of random contact in public spaces such as the marketplace or the bus, but rather were encounters within the context of semi-institutionalised spaces of the family home, the workplace and a school.

Our account recognises that prejudice is not a static property that an individual either holds or does not possess; and that individuals cannot be simplistically categorised as members of the 'majority' or 'minority'. Rather, it demonstrates the dynamism of self-identities and the complex ways that individuals frame themselves as both passing judgements on others and behaving in prejudicial ways, yet also as the recipients of others' prejudices and as able to change their attitudes to specific differences.

Influenced by Sayer's (2005) argument<sup>1</sup> that we develop internalised moral dispositions as a product of socialisation, we understand both of our interviewees' accounts to demonstrate pre-reflexive, routine orientations to the world produced through their early emplaced experiences. Yet, in acknowledging the significance of these early dispositions towards 'others', we do not mean to suggest that these have shaped their subsequent actions in a deterministic way.

Rather, both Craig and Amirah's accounts describe changes in their attitudes towards particular social categories—minority ethnic groups and disabled people—when mobility (socio-economic and geographical respectively) emplaced them in new spatial contexts, populated by different people and governed by new social normativities. In both cases, exposure to different ways of seeing the world facilitated self-reflection about their own lives and encounters with specific 'others' such that they intentionally produced and

embodied new dispositions towards these particular social groups.

Yet Craig and Amirah's accounts also narrate the persistence of negative attitudes towards other categories of difference: immigrants and lesbians and gay men respectively. In both cases, they are emplaced in specific social communities—a White, working class neighbourhood and a transnational Pakistani Muslim network—that provide containing narratives which foreshadow their everyday positioning towards these particular 'others', not withstanding their wider progressive dispositions. In Craig's case, a narrative of economic insecurity and injustice frames the negativity he feels towards immigrants. Although Amirah's account of her support for her son's lesbian teacher demonstrates that it is possible to stretch containing narratives (here, through her interpretation of Islam) in an elastic way to accommodate an exceptional individual, for contact with individuals to change attitudes towards the groups they represent we must be receptive, able and want to rethink the dominant routine orientations to the world in which we are emplaced and invested.

Through its attention to processes of both mobility and emplacement, this paper contributes to debates in urban studies about when contact with difference matters by highlighting the importance of everyday social normativities in the production of moral dispositions. As Butler (1993) argues, it is through the repetition of norms that worlds materialise.

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## Note

1. Sayer in turn was influenced by Bourdieu's concept of habitus.

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