

Holding up a mirror: researching symmetrically to explore exclusion, othering and whiteness in local environmental governance

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Abstract

The positioning of minoritised and racialised groups such as Global South immigrants as deficient in knowledge, language or motivation is a form of othering prevalent in all spheres of Global North societies, and the environmental sector is no exception. In both academic literature and policy, there is an assumption that minoritised groups are “hard to reach” and less interested in sustainability than the usual white middle class environmental subjects. But what might the picture look like if it focused on those who have the power to make choices about whose interests matter and whose can be ignored? By holding up a mirror to the powerful and asking them to reflect on their own practices and assumptions, we centre the operation of structural inequality to show that the lack of inclusivity in sustainability policy is very often a product of structural whiteness rather than the deficiencies of racialised communities. This article draws on interviews with key informants involved in local environmental governance to explore how people in positions of power serve to obstruct, erase or facilitate the engagement of racialised communities in activities relevant for environmental change. We argue that a symmetrical approach to research and analysis is needed to avoid othering immigrants while surfacing whiteness as the context in which othering occurs. We call for greater attention to how white structural advantage shapes the design and implementation of local green agendas in order to develop just and transformative approaches to environmental policy-making.

Keywords: local environmental governance, immigrants, othering, whiteness, symmetry

1. Introduction

In an article published in *Local Environment*, Head et al. state what should be an uncontroversial fact: “effective environmental management in the Global North needs to take account of increasing ethnic diversity” (2021, p.595). Given that growing levels of immigration from South to North are driving this increase in diversity in many cities, an important yet underdeveloped area of research is the migration-sustainability nexus. However, when it involves racialised minorities in white-dominated countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), research on the migration-sustainability nexus is faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, centring experiences and knowledges that have tended to be invisibilised is an important contribution to the study of environmental governance. On the other hand, such asymmetrical research risks affirming the problematic positioning of immigrants as unexplored others who are “hard to reach” and in need of special attention in order to meet official environmental sustainability targets. In much of the research in the sustainable consumption field, there is a lack of political analysis needed to contribute

to socio-environmental justice (cf. Anantharaman 2018). This leads to inattention to how policy agendas and the assumptions of people in positions of power may serve to obstruct, erase or facilitate the engagement of immigrants from Global South (GS) countries in activities relevant for environmental change. Awareness of, and desire to avoid, this risk leads our attention to those who frame the agenda and set the targets within the white spaces and structures of local government. Who are the people behind a city's "green agenda"? What is their positionality and what assumptions do they make about diverse populations, in particular about GS immigrants? What, if anything, are they thinking and doing to increase social justice within their city's environmental plans and policies?

To begin to answer these questions, we explore the barriers and enablers of awareness and greater sensitivity to ethno-cultural diversity within urban environmental governance processes. We draw on concepts of othering and whiteness to propose a symmetrical approach to understanding the migration-sustainability nexus at the level of the local state. Using the city of Manchester as a study site, we discuss the findings of interviews with key informants against a backdrop of contextual information gleaned from policy documents and media sources. After a brief literature review to situate the project, we present the theoretical rationale for a symmetrical research design when studying the migration-sustainability nexus. We then present and discuss four themes that emerged from the interviews. Ultimately, we make the argument that symmetry is needed as a strategy to avoid othering immigrants while surfacing whiteness as the context in which othering occurs. We call for greater attention to how white structural advantage shapes the design and implementation of local green agendas in order to develop just and transformative approaches to environmental policy-making.

2. Literature review

2.1 Exclusion and sustainability

A central project of the environmental justice (EJ) movement has been to show that sustainability is an exclusionary concept that is practiced in ways that support racist and colonial power relations. In particular, EJ scholars have challenged the white-centrism that leads to the marginalisation of issues of concern to people of colour by governments and mainstream environmental organisations (Agyeman 2001; Gibson-Wood and Wakefield 2013; Curnow and Helferty 2018; Coolsaet 2021). In the UK, for example, the environmental sector is overwhelmingly white, with just over 3.1% of professionals

identifying as people of colour (Bell and Bevan 2021).¹ This necessitates consideration of structural inequalities in any analysis of the involvement of immigrants in environmental governance. To achieve this goal, it is important to recognise not only that marginalised groups are often side-lined from wider debate and discussion, but also to appreciate how different groups can and do contribute to environmentalism. The purpose of academic research and activist organising is to redress the problems of white-centrism and exclusion in sustainability fields in ways that contribute to the empowerment and improved quality of life for marginalised communities and ultimately to a paradigm shift in minority world environmental thinking (Head et al. 2019; Bradley 2009).

In 2019 we published results of a study carried out in an underserved area of inner-city Manchester (MacGregor et al. 2019). Based on survey responses and in-depth interviews, that paper presents an analysis of how immigrants from Somalia understand the concept of environmental sustainability, as well as of the extent to which they enact various pro-environmental behaviours (or PEB) and engage with the green policy agenda in their everyday lives. In our current project,² we build on and expand these insights by exploring the everyday sustainability practices of people who have moved to the Manchester from Somalia or Pakistan. This research is situated within the growing literature on critical sustainable consumption, which has emerged in the past five years in response to the largely apolitical and homogenising tendencies within studies of environmentally-significant consumer behaviour (Anantharaman 2018). Until recently, studies of sustainable consumption have tended to focus on practices at the micro-level in a way that obscures the identities and positionalities of the actors carrying out everyday practices. As a result, there has been insufficient attention to questions of identity and difference: how class, caste, culture, gender, age, migration status, and other demographic variables shape or constrain people's uptake of PEB, such as waste recycling, resource conservation and non-fossil fuelled travel. Power relations have been a missing element in the field. In order for research on sustainability in general, and sustainable consumption in particular, to move beyond affirming the status quo, new approaches to research and theorising are needed. We argue that such approaches must use the tools of critical theory to deconstruct dominant paradigms and to analyse the inequalities, hierarchies and

¹ We include these figures not to imply that increasing the numbers of professionals of colour in the environmental sector would change the structural inequality but rather to evidence the claim that the field is currently dominated by white people.

² More information about the TIES Project is here:

<https://www.sci.manchester.ac.uk/research/projects/environmental-sustainability/>

exclusions that fuel the twin crises of social injustice and environmental unsustainability (Middlemiss et al. 2019; Anantharaman 2018).

2.2 “Why are you asking us?” the case for symmetry

Our research responds to Head et al.’s conclusion that there is a “need to go beyond western logics in research design and method” in order to develop more inclusive understandings of sustainability involving immigrant voices in particular (2019, p.13). People who have migrated from non-Western contexts and cultures to live in over-developed cities have valuable vantage points and yet are seldom included, or included in a tokenistic way, in environmental social science research. This may in part be because this subject area is dominated by white Western researchers who lack the skills, resources or motivation for carrying out research with racialised migrants from the GS. It may also stem from the lack of trust or interest in academic research on the part of newly arrived residents. To overcome such barriers, Head et al. suggest working with community co-researchers to facilitate the inclusion of participants and minimise language and interpretation difficulties (2018, p. 14). We have adopted this strategy in our research, but remain mindful of the challenges of reciprocity, relationship building and power imbalances that inevitably arise.

By designing a project that focuses on people who have migrated from specific countries as the sample population, our intention is to make visible experiences and knowledge that are often ignored in wider Manchester society. But, from the perspective of participants, selecting Somalis and Pakistanis as our study populations can appear tantamount to affirming their status as others and a “hard to reach” group. A common response to our request for participation is *why are you asking us?* We find this question challenging to answer but valuable in demanding reflection on the political significance of our project as well as reflexivity about our positionalities as researchers (Cohen-Miller and Boivan 2022).³ Because we take seriously the tension between wanting to centre those who have been marginalised on the one hand and the risk of othering that comes with this move on the other hand, we have developed a symmetrical approach to the research. Here we discuss our decision to include interviews with local politicians and policy officers as a way to balance and contextualise our focus on immigrant communities. We set out the theoretical case for symmetry as part of a normative commitment to socially transformative knowledge production that should inform research in the environmental and climate justice fields.

In social interactions, symmetry suggests reciprocity and fairness between equals, whereas power relations are asymmetrical, with one side being subordinated to the other. Studying only one side of a two-

³ Our positionality statements are available on the project website.

way relationship that is fundamentally unequal leads to a partial account of what is going on, which can hardly lead to constructive or effective responses. Because power is relational and marginalisation is a process that involves some who are pushed to the margins and some who are actively doing and/or benefitting from the pushing, a symmetrical approach is necessary for comprehensive analysis. This means studying the powerful and powerless at the same time. We see it as working in conjunction with intersectionality in social analysis, which allows “renewed visibility” of those being examined through prospects of “equality, fairness, inclusion and social justice” (Hill Collins 2017, pp. 35-36). Most importantly, we argue that taking a symmetrical approach is a strategy to avoid othering in research.

Othering

Social inequalities and marginalisation are produced through active processes that involve agency. Here we think the concept of othering is important to discuss. Othering is a discursive mechanism that attaches markers of inferiority (and worse) to difference in order to justify exclusion. Othering is a process that can involve treating heterogeneous groups as a homogenous category, affirming stereotypes, obscuring complex histories and cultures, and maintaining social distance from those seen as others. Scholars such as Hall (1997) and Said (1995) explain othering as part of Eurocentrism and everyday racism.

In research that troubles inequalities and the production of marginalised others, it seems more common to study those who are on the receiving end of these processes. For example, feminist research studies women, queer studies focus on LGBTQI+ people, and anti-racist/post-colonial research seek to centre the experiences of colonized people of colour. While important work, it is not without tensions and pitfalls. In critical methodology there is awareness that, when researching with people from marginalised groups, “the desire to know the other can be a potential source of dominance” (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi 2012, p.299). It is therefore important to design research that mitigates this potential unintended consequence.

According to Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012), strategies for avoiding othering in research include the use of narrative, dialogue, and reflexivity in writing up. Each of these strategies can be effective at countering the moves and mechanisms through which othering takes place, such as objectification, homogenisation and misrecognition. A key mechanism at work in othering is decontextualisation, which involves presenting the behaviour of people in the other group in a vacuum, detached from the contexts and conditions in which it developed and is continued. While enacting forms of narrative, dialog and reflexivity will undoubtedly be valuable strategies that we intend to adopt throughout our project, we want to add another strategy for analysing-while-avoiding the othering of our immigrant participants. In

our case, this amounts to symmetrically studying the assumptions of people in positions of decision-making power in local state who have the power to position Somali and Pakistani communities as “hard to reach” and, essentially, as *others*. This is a powerful response to the decontextualisation problem.

The positioning of minoritised groups such as immigrants from GS countries as deficient, due to language, culture or lack of motivation, is a form of othering that occurs in all aspects of UK society, the environmental sector included (Byrne and Alexander 2020). In both academic literature and policy, there is an assumption that certain groups are “hard to reach” and less interested in sustainability than the usual white middle class environmental subjects (cf. Agyeman 2001; Bradley 2009; Bell 2021). Where does this assumption come from? What might the picture look like if it was refined as “easy to ignore” (Wöhrer et al. 2021). By flipping the script so that agency is attributed to those who make choices about whose interests matter and whose can be ignored, we bring into sharper focus the operation of structural inequality. It may go some way to finding more effective policy approaches than those that promote simplistic notions of cultural diversity without dismantling the reasons for the durability of white privilege.

Whiteness

Goetz et al. (2020) offer a detailed framework for analysing the significance of whiteness to the field of urban policy and planning: whiteness as economically valuable, socially invisible, and structurally durable. Recognising its invisibility, they argue, is a key strategy for understanding its operation. Racialised social identities can be understood as products of racialised power imbalances. Accordingly, whiteness, or what it means to be white, is a dynamic social construct that white people wield and deploy for social and political gain in contrast to a racialised, subordinated other (Painter 2011). By “surfacing whiteness” (Goetz et al. 2020, p. 150) it may become possible to see how it has afforded its beneficiaries political advantage and other forms of privilege. It is also important to examine how privilege allows white people to be ignorant about certain unpleasant truths about the social world. The philosopher Charles Mills describes this unknowing as “white ignorance” afforded by racial privilege (Mills 2007, p. 15). Referring to the US context, Lies claims that white Americans routinely wield their racial identities in policy decisions and when constructing an understanding of their social worlds “despite widely held beliefs and claims to colour-blindness” (2021, pp 5-6).

Criticism of the unacknowledged whiteness of environmentalism and environmental policy has been growing in recent years in the UK after about two decades of relative silence, at least in academic environmental fields. A discussion of the historical construction of environmental whiteness in the UK is beyond the scope of this paper, but significant work has been done within the field of geography to

document and analyse its contours (particularly in rural and countryside contexts) (cf Holloway 2007; Knowles 2008). A notable example is Agyeman's (2001) discussion of the exclusivity of sustainable development policy in the UK. He shows the existence of a stereotype of ethnic minorities being "confined to impoverished urban environments, reluctant to engage in the wider environmental agenda and unskilled in the specialised disciplines involved in environmental protection" (2001, p. 17, quoting Brown 1999, p, 6). He argues that racialised minorities are "routinely short-changed" due to institutionalized racism and "a systematic indifference to their 'difference'" (2001, p. 15). The root cause of this problem is the invisible power of whiteness in governance at all levels: "the ethnic Other has been constantly redefined and renamed, reinforcing its difference and marginality from a white norm" (p. 17). Agyeman concludes with the suggestion that overcoming racist exclusion of ethnic minorities and people of colour from sustainable development agenda requires a more proactive role for local government and a proven commitment to anti-racism and racial equality. Twenty years on, it seems questionable whether his call to action has been heard within the white-dominated spaces of local environmental governance in Manchester, as we will see in the next section.

3. Research context: Manchester

Manchester is a city with a total population of nearly three million in the northwest of England. It has a two-tiered governance structure, which includes ten local councils (including one called Manchester City Council [MCC]) and a city-regional combined authority (Greater Manchester Combined Authority [GMCA]). The GMCA has its own environmental plan, as do the individual councils, and a complex assortment of different climate change and sustainability initiatives have been proliferating at all levels, from wards to city-region, over the past decade. For the purposes of this discussion, we refer to the research context simply as Manchester and engage with policies and policy makers from GMCA and MCC only, because the majority of the Somali and Pakistani immigrants we are researching with live in inner city wards within the city of Manchester.

Manchester is juggling the pressures of inward migration with an ambition to become a world leader in "inclusive and sustainable growth" (MCCB 2018). In 2018, the elected mayor of GM Andy Burnham pledged to make GM carbon neutral by 2038. The ambitions for making GM one of the greenest city-regions in Europe are outlined in its five-year Environment Plan, which features science-based targets and annual Green Summits starting with the launch of the plan in 2019. The Green Summit is an important means of public consultation, showcasing ambition and innovation, and reporting on quantifiable progress

made across GMCA. The Mayor's aspiration is matched by plans published by MCC and its multi-stakeholder Manchester Climate Change Agency (MCCA). The latter works closely with the University of Manchester's Tyndall Centre to ensure their plans also have measurable goals and targets that are informed by climate science. The Manchester Climate Change Framework 2020-25 sets out targets and methods of monitoring progress towards their implementation. The Framework's aim is that "Manchester will play its full part in limiting the impacts of climate change and create a healthy, green, socially just city where everyone can thrive". Both GMCA and MCC identify "behaviour change" as a core strategy for the achievement of decarbonisation (MCCB 2018). A recent initiative at the MCC level has been the introduction of three climate change officers (CCOs) who work with local councillors, neighbourhood officers, and residents of selected wards to develop locally-based climate initiatives and approaches to reduce carbon (MCC Governance report 2021).

These declared aims for sustainability, justice and community inclusion can be read against evidence that in fact Manchester is currently experiencing rapid social change and increasing levels of inequality within its population. Between the 2001 and 2011 censuses it had the second highest population growth by overseas migration of all UK cities (Bullen 2015), with 8.6% of the city-region population born outside the European Union (ONS 2011). The largest number of immigrants come from the Indian Subcontinent and the most noticeable change has been the increase in "ethnic Africans" (Shankley 2017). Among the largest immigrant communities from the GS are Pakistanis at 8.5% and Black African at 5.2% (MCC 2011: 1). Moreover, it is widely acknowledged that Manchester's ambitions are challenged by increasing poverty and social exclusion in the past decade of Central Government austerity policy, which has brought severe reductions in local authority budgets (Etherington and Jones 2017). This means that there is a wide gap between policy ambitions and the local reality of inadequate service provision and low environmental quality, especially in underserved wards. Spatial mapping of census data suggests that super-diverse wards such as Moss Side (where we conducted our pilot research with Somalia-origin residents) have higher than average levels of multiple deprivation (DataShine n.d.). Drawing on insights from Bramley et al.'s (2012) research in other UK cities, we expect that it is in the most deprived and diverse wards with high levels of international migration that realizing Manchester's vision of inclusive sustainability ambitions will be most challenging.

Along with the aspiration of moving towards a "green city" (Our Manchester 2015, p. 3), there is a growing need to engage more "diverse communities" in the design, delivery and implementation. There is also generalised awareness of the need to improve race relations and race equality in all institutions of local governance. Recognising the problem of a lack of diversity, a GMCA Race Equality Panel was

established in 2020 to tackle racial discrimination and disadvantage and to “champion Greater Manchester as an inclusive city-region”. In June 2020, an independent review was set up to investigate lack of diversity in MCC. The resulting report reveals that while a third of Manchester's population is “BAME” (their usage), people of colour make up only around 20% of the council’s workforce (MEN 2020). In that report it is acknowledged that non-white employees are under-represented at more senior levels and that overall progress towards equality has not been fast enough.

4. Methods

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 27 individuals involved in various aspects of environmental and climate change policy in Manchester.⁴ This includes 20 people working inside different levels of local government (“insiders”) and seven working outside in NGOs and community groups (“outsiders”). We used a combination of internet searches and snowballing to identify interviewees. The interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom due to the Covid-19 restrictions that were in place at the time. Some were conducted by two interviewers, a white woman and a woman of Pakistani heritage, but the majority were carried out by the latter. Data were coded by the team, first individually and then discussed collectively, to identify patterns and common themes. Of the 27 interviewees, 17 are white and ten are people of colour including individuals who identified themselves as Somali, Indian, Pakistani, Jamaican and mixed-race; 12 are men and 15 are women.⁵ We interviewed white and people of colour key informants, both because we understand whiteness to be structural and in order to be consistent with our symmetrical approach. Although most of the key informants are public figures who spoke to us in their professional capacity, we have been careful to avoid revealing their identities in this paper due to the potentially sensitive nature of the subjects discussed. We did not explicitly ask interviewees who are white to reflect on their white privilege or how their whiteness might shape their professional working in the sphere of environmental governance. We also did not alert them to our interest in surfacing whiteness as a strategy for contextualising the lack of inclusivity of the environmental policy agenda and for resisting othering of

⁴ The research project obtained ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee (2021-11454-18493). Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

⁵ At this time we do not know how many of those working in the environmental sector in Manchester are PoC so cannot compare with the 3% nationally who work in this sector. We did not set out to develop a representative sample – it is purposive sample of people selected to interview because they are in positions to give us information that we cannot obtain through other means.

racialized immigrants. As a result, we have anonymised our interviewees, allocating each a key informant (KI) code, to protect individuals from any negative implications of our findings and to maintain trust.

5. Discussion of findings

Our analysis of the themes identified in the interviews is focused on how individuals working within spaces of local governance understand and react to the problem of and need for greater inclusivity in the green agenda in Manchester. We aim to understand the context in which our research with immigrants from Somalia and Pakistan is situated, as well as to look at both sides of the relationship that produces and sustains exclusion: structural whiteness and racialised othering. We therefore asked interviewees a set of questions designed to elicit their perceptions of the lack of diversity, strategies being used to redress it, and struggles experienced in the process. Four main themes emerged, which raise yet more questions about the integration of the sustainability and race equality agendas in Manchester.

Easy to ignore?

First, and unsurprisingly, the domination by white people of the climate/environment sector in Manchester was readily acknowledged by all key informants as something that needs to be addressed. Most interviewees did not frame this as a problem of “whiteness”, however, instead agreeing that is problem of lack of diversity. Those who did discuss it more directly in relation to race are themselves people of colour, and we discuss this finding below. We asked about “inclusivity” and almost all answered that even though there may be people from a range of backgrounds involved, the public face of the green agenda is white and middle class. For example, interviewees admitted that the Green Summit mainly involves a select and rather “insular” group of people and that the organizers have never managed to make it an inclusive event that represents the cultural diversity in Manchester. One said:

...it was who you'd expect: middle class, middle age, professional white people... There was one person who was a person of colour. But that was it. Yeah, I mean, there was good gender balance, but on class, education, ethnicity it was mostly homogenous. They're all wonderful people, nothing against them but it was an insular group. (KI-4, insider)

Interviewees agreed that, while there is a need to improve – “to up our game” (KI-2, insider) on ethnic diversity, there are barriers to making it happen. One agreed that there is racial inequality, but suggested that this cannot be blamed on the institutions because there are deeper cultural issues involved that are difficult for local authorities as employers to address:

I would say that the whole agenda isn't particularly diverse [...] it's partly an issue of not getting the right balance. I'm not sure whether it's all on the shoulder of employers is what

I'm trying to say... I think employers could do more to ensure that we are more diverse as a working population, but I actually think there is a cultural thing in there as well. There are certain communities I think that don't see the environment as being a valuable job, so they push their kids into other professions. (KI-3, insider)

A few interviewees seemed to think that the barriers are more to do with lack of know-how and/or effort to learn how to engage with a more representative population of citizens. Some suggested that it is due to lack of necessary resources. We know from other research that there is a narrative in Manchester that the local state is hamstrung by the need "to do more with less" due to austerity over the past decade; some activists in Manchester believe this has become a standard excuse for maintaining the status quo (MacGregor 2021) .

We specifically asked interviewees whether there is a perception that some communities or groups in Manchester, especially those who are newly arrived and less proficient with English language (e.g., from Somalia and Pakistan), are challenging to engage with or seen as "hard to reach". Many agreed that this perception does affect the way the local government operates, but also offered explanations for it and/or reassurances that this perception is being challenged internally:

I think we might have been guilty about using that phrase, but I think it's a bit lazy on our part because I don't think we have attempted to reach out to those communities. 'Hard to reach' because possibly it would have been our fault because we have not been able to go out and speak to those communities. (KI-2, insider)

Another respondent was more critical, suggesting there is lack of interest in broadening the process to a wider pool of participants:

[the local government] puts people in the bucket of Usual Suspects and Unusual Suspects that, that's kind of their term, used as an excuse. It's an easy out for them to say 'these people are just hard to reach and we don't have the capacity to reach them so this is why we haven't engaged them' ... As an organization [it] values engaging with certain types of stakeholders, and those are people who are professional who are trained who were of the kind of usual suspects that they engage with. So it's not that it's impossible for them to engage with Unusual Suspects or people that are 'hard to reach', it's just they aren't who is valued. (KI-4, insider)

This comment seems to resonate with the discursive distinction Wöhrer et al. (2021) make between "hard to reach" and "easy to ignore". While the interviewee does not reflect on any deliberate decision to ignore what they call "certain communities", it may be the case that the local authority has been able to get away with not actively engaging, not even trying. Alternatively, it may be the case that white-dominated teams regard some communities as lower down the priority list, or they assume themselves to be unable to reach "certain communities" because of lack of cultural connection. Either way, this means that the deficiency

lies with the state rather than the communities, and acknowledging this fact helps to challenge prevailing assumptions, which is the main affordance of the symmetrical approach we advocate.

Instrumentalising inclusion?

A second theme in the interview data that appears to be supported also by documents and observations is that, for many involved in the green agenda in Manchester, redressing the overrepresentation of white people by involving communities of colour has instrumental benefits. They admit it is difficult to do, but also state a commitment to improving engagement with a greater diversity of communities in order to deliver on the agenda and meet measurable targets. Here we see an interesting similarity between meeting carbon reduction targets and so-called “equality, diversity and inclusion” (EDI) targets, both of which are important in a neoliberal managerial culture of local government in the UK (cf. Robinson and van Veelen 2022). So, unlike our research project, becoming more inclusive is not necessarily about improving or challenging the mainstream green agenda by learning from invisibilised perspectives. It is about spreading the messages of “behaviour change” to get results rather than finding out about how different knowledges can contribute to the agenda. This is because the agenda is now set and based on climate scientific expertise and a one-off public consultation process that is now in the past.

Interviewer: ... working with diverse groups to get them on board with the agenda [is important], but then what about the other way around... [finding out] what does the agenda have to learn from them, which is kind of turning the tables around. Does that seem a valuable line to pursue from your perspective?

Interviewee: I’m not sure. Let me tell you the reason why. I have got a fairly good idea now about what we need to do. I think we had a good idea a couple of years ago when we got to the 5-year plan, but the work we have done since then has both confirmed and solidified and clarified the actions that we need to take... (KI-3, insider)

From this interviewee’s perspective, the time for finding out what citizens think about the green agenda was in the early consultation stage. The GMCA’s 5-year plan, which is now in place, was the outcome of a citywide process that involved listening events with a range of groups. However, we learned from a key informant that the process was far from inclusive: “probably the main disappointment I had with the listening events is that that we weren’t able to get more of a representative voice from Greater Manchester” (KI-4, insider). This reflection echoes criticisms made by Agyeman (2001) with respect to the procedural failings of local authorities in their efforts to consult on LA21. He argues that to the extent that environmental policy agendas are led by people who frame environmental quality goals in a “positivist, objective and scientific” light, the integration of social justice goals will take a backseat. That this frame is dominant and rarely questioned within environmentalism (perhaps even more so in climate policy today)

and tends to lead to “indifference to difference” which is, as Agyeman argues, “a major factor in the whiteness of the movement” (2001, p. 20).

Trying hard or hardly trying?

Whether the motivation is increasing representation or delivering messages promoting pro-environmental behaviour (PEB) to help meet targets, our research finds that there has been a noticeable push for new strategies for increasing the inclusivity of environmental governance in Manchester over the past two years. In fact, several interviewees asked if they could have access to the data we are collecting to help them with their plans. This increase in activity is the third theme we identified in the interviews. The strategies mentioned include: working with religious leaders to reach into faith-based communities (e.g., Muslims), hiring external companies and consultants to deliver PEB campaigns in local areas, and increasing the role of neighbourhood-level initiatives (e.g., through three local climate change officers and facilitating processes to produce local climate action plans). It is beyond the scope of the present paper to evaluate these strategies and interventions (and too soon), but there is much to reflect on when they are viewed through the lens of symmetry described earlier.

One reflection is that the more top-down the initiative, the greater the potential to sustain status quo assumptions, exclusions and power relations. For example, the strategy adopted by local officials (most of whom are white) of working with faith leaders may seem expeditious to the pursuit of greater inclusion when policy teams lack connections with “certain communities” (meaning people of minoritised faiths), but few interviewees acknowledged problems with this approach. Those who did were critical of tokenism and the use of unrepresentative gatekeepers. One interviewee said:

The way I would describe it is that they didn't want to get their hands dirty. What they prefer to do and have done for very long time is go through gatekeepers and this kind of colonial mindset lies at the heart of why they won't do it. There's almost like a sense of disgust that I'd have to go down and have to like talk to them. Whereas, if I speak to Uncle Khan or Uncle Chaudry or Auntie something – job's done. This this reliance on this gatekeeper is a terrible thing for communities because yeah you'll get the gatekeepers, but guess what? Do you really think they've gone and consulted their own community? No, they don't. (KI-17, insider)

Similarly, if the goal is to improve inclusion of communities that are less well represented (due to racialisation, poverty, and other causes of marginalisation), then there is reason to question the wisdom of contracting external actors to deliver campaigns rather than supporting existing grassroots initiatives. One example that came up in several interviews was a London-based environmental charity known for using “nudge” techniques to promote PEB that has been funded to work in underserved inner city areas such as

Moss Side. Relatedly, one interviewee was critical of the council's top-down imposition of environmental campaigns onto marginalised communities, suggesting that they do not land well with her constituents:

... I don't think the Council's necessarily the right people [to deliver an inclusive green agenda], it's too white middle class. If you don't feel you don't belong and then somebody comes in from the more affluent, academic background and a different area, you just find it very patronizing. But if you look similar and are from there, they take it differently. And I have found some of the other services, there is [name of external charity], I've not found them right for our communities to be honest. (KI-15, insider)

It is perhaps unsurprising that the interviewees who work higher up in government departments and in parachuted-in organisations seem the closest to targets and farthest away from the everyday concerns of Manchester residents. On the other hand, the work being done within the wards and neighbourhoods, coordinated by the climate change officers (CCOs), displays a greater degree of sensitivity to the challenges experienced by marginalised residents and of scepticism of how far current high-level/top-down plans go towards increasing representation and inclusion. At the time of interviewing, all three CCOs were women and two of the three CCOs were women of colour. Their work is embedded in communities, and all talked about having to tailor their efforts and ways of speaking about climate change to be relatable and relevant to residents who come from a wide range of backgrounds and in some wards are living in extreme poverty. They, along with other interviewees working at neighbourhood level, seemed most pro-active and reflexive about the possibilities for and barriers to overcoming the barriers to making the green agenda more relevant to larger numbers of people in Manchester. For example:

We made a really good connection with a mosque in Moss Side used by Somali community. And I think it was just a perfect example of, you know, people see certain communities as hard to reach, but they weren't hard to reach - we reached out to them and they were so happy to work alongside us and they were really [helpful]. (KI-9, insider)

They also gave specific examples of the issues of concern to new immigrants in their constituencies and how they perceive climate change-related policies. It is worth noting, however, that all three CCOs said that their ability to make significant change in communities is limited due to having a very small budget.

Beyond tokenism?

The fourth theme captures reflections provided by interviewees who directly addressed issues of race and whiteness during the interviews, all of whom are people of colour. In most cases, these reflections came up in one-to-one conversation with the interviewer who is UK born with Pakistani heritage. Whereas white interviewees did not directly speak about racism or white privilege in the interviews, and tended to use the word "diversity" as a catch-all for this topic, for non-white interviewees these issues were central to their

opinions about, and involvement in, the green agenda in Manchester. As with all people we interviewed, these interviewees said that the environmental sector in Manchester is not inclusive, but they went further to voice criticisms of the lack of inclusivity – and dominance of whiteness – of the local state overall.

Several made comments about the need for better representation of citizens of colour in local politics, pointing to the fact that the city's population is highly multi-cultural -- "more diverse than people think" (KI-15 insider) -- yet white people dominate in elected decision-making positions, get more funding, and enjoy greater advantage overall. For example:

We need Officers to represent our communities. So if you are in Moss Side we need a Black worker. If you are in Longsight, Levenshulme, you need Asian workers. We still haven't got that as a council, but when you're working at grassroots levels, no one's saying that has to be. No, it can't exclude, you know, white people, but you do need people of colour to be there, because if it's white middle class people, my community walk away because even the working class, don't connect...So, I think we need to do more. (KI-17, insider)

Connected to this lack of representation, there was a perception among some interviewees that it is difficult for people of colour to engage actively with the environmentalism, both inside as professionals and outside as activists. Two interviewees in professional positions drew attention to difficulties of speaking out due to the whiteness of the sector. One said:

...you obviously have to be careful, sometimes because you don't want to be seen to be being over-challenging. You want to be seen as a critical friend. I have to be careful, and it's a shame because sometimes you can have labels like 'angry Black woman'. I feel like sometimes I have to be careful around how I articulate an issue; I need to make sure the words come out in a positive way. (KI-12, insider)

Speaking as activists, other interviewees shared experiences of not feeling welcome or else being the only person of colour in environmental organisations and projects, for example:

... there's a lot of hand wringing about how the environmental movement is too white-middle class [...] there's a lot of segregation and people might not feel welcome in those spaces. That's why people are working within their own communities because they don't really feel like they're welcome. (KI-16, outsider)

...some of the things that I do are sort of dominated by a white demographic. And I find myself doing a lot of things where I definitely stand out, where I am the only ethnic minority. And I think that's when people wanted me to get involved more... because they're like 'great you know we've not had one before'. (KI-14, outsider)

The second quote refers to the issue of tokenism that was mentioned by some interviewees of colour and that we observed through other aspects of our research. There is evidence to suggest that some efforts to increase diversity can lead to the overburdening of a small number of activists and professionals whose

involvement is invited in order to redress the whiteness of green organisations, projects and events (e.g., the Green Summit). For these activists, it is difficult not to feel exploited for tokenistic reasons, yet the desire to be involved to increase representation is strong, often leading to burnout (we discuss this point in greater depth in a 2023 article based on research with Muslim climate intermediaries in the UK (Tobin et al, 2023). Experiences such as these highlight the operation of othering that continues to be common within white-dominated environmental governance spaces in the UK, even after decades of critique by EJ scholars and activists.

6. Conclusion

In this article we have advocated and exemplified a symmetrical analysis. The fact that immigrants from the Global South (GS) have been largely absent from environmental research and policy-making cannot be fully understood by only studying them. If power is relational, then both parties to the relationship – the powerless and the powerful – need to be included in the analysis, and we argue that this symmetry should be part of an environmental justice research agenda. We know, from lessons learned so far, that our project risks both being perceived as othering immigrants from the GS as well as engaging in colonial forms of knowledge extraction unless we reflect carefully on our research design, ethics and positionality. This is why we carried out interviews with people involved in designing and implementing the green agenda in Manchester in parallel with our research with members of the Somali and Pakistani immigrant communities. We make the case for this symmetrical approach as both consistent with intersectionality and as a strategy for reducing the risk of othering immigrants in research on the migration-sustainability nexus. By taking a close look at the political context and conditions in which the green agenda is developed, we will be better able to produce the kind of situated and embodied analysis advocated by Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012, p. 300). While we cannot completely avoid othering, by holding up a mirror to the powerful and asking them to reflect on their own practices and assumptions, we can show that lack of diversity and inclusion are a product of structural whiteness rather than the deficiencies of racialised communities.

Moreover, a symmetrical approach helps to foreground the structural inequalities that cause the othering and invisibilisation of some groups while privileging others who occupy traditionally dominant and unmarked positions of race, gender, class or immigration status. The invisibilisation of minoritised groups is often assumed to stem from their own failures or deficits (e.g., “they fail to integrate”, “they don’t speak English”) rather than structural factors. In this context, a symmetrical approach enables us to examine not only how intersecting forms of inequality (religion and race, for example) can feed into and construct new

spaces of inequalities which are underpinned by wider systems of (white, cis-gender male, able bodied, UK born, and affluent) domination within the environmental field, but also how political resistance may be mobilized to counter this process (Hill Collins 2017; for an example, see Griffith and Bevan 2021).

Symmetry is compatible with intersectionality as an analytical tool in that it helps to show how both privilege (e.g., stemming from whiteness, maleness, etc.) and inequalities are relational and socially produced (for a discussion of intersectionality in environmental-political research see Kaisjer and Kronsell 2014).

The fact that so little has changed since Agyeman's (2001) research on the LA21 process at local government level suggests that efforts to promote racial justice in the environmental field continue to be poorly designed and implemented. But there are also deeper problems stemming from the durability of whiteness in UK, which have yet to be acknowledged much less tackled effectively. In our interviews, local government insiders agreed that the environmental agenda in Manchester needs to be more inclusive, yet those who are white seemed to lack self-reflexivity about why the environmental sector is dominated by white professionals who struggle to address the problem. Even though we discussed lack of diversity with all key informants, none of those who are white reflected on their own whiteness nor on the fact that the institutions and organisations responsible for designing, delivering and communicating the messages on climate change and Manchester's green agenda are white-dominated spaces. In this context, so-called "EDI" strategies can only be shallow or tokenistic because there is very little genuine understanding of what marginalised communities know, want, or are able to do. The issue is framed as lack of presence of people of colour rather than the omnipresence of whiteness with all its assumptions and privileges. As a result, there is little scope for widening decision-making power, let alone relinquishing it. In contrast, we argue that true symmetry (i.e. reciprocity and fairness between equals) demands a surfacing of whiteness in the process of trying to understand how powerful professionals, organisations and individuals driving environmental initiatives engage with minoritised communities and how those communities respond in return. Prioritising research that allows for this surfacing is a promising strategy for pursuing environmental justice in local communities in the UK and beyond.

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