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'You can't move in Hackney without bumping into an anthropologist': why certain places attract research attention

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'You can't move in Hackney without bumping into an anthropologist'[1]: Why certain places attract research attention

1. **Introduction**

A criminology colleague once told one of us that in the 1990s young people who lived in Somerstown, then a deprived residential area behind Kings Cross station in London, were so used to the presence of researchers that they would confidently ask new researchers about their project's methods and ethical protocols. This anecdote neatly captures some of the tensions and dilemmas of the 'who', the 'where' and the 'what for' of social research as well as reminding us that some places - and some people - are disproportionately targeted by social researchers.

While these are longstanding epistemological and methodological dilemmas (see for example debates about researching elites Clarke, 2008; Neal and McLaughlin, 2009) raising them in relation to the phenomenon of 'place-based' over-research remains relatively unusual. That said, a few studies do exist. Sukarieh and Tannock (2013) interviewed research participants in a particular place - Shatila refugee camp in Palestine – about their experiences of repeated research visits. Crow (2013) and Camfield and Palmer-Jones (2013) focus on 're-studies' that are discussed as a more purposeful attempt at understanding longitudinal social change in specific communities. While helpful, these studies tend to approach the places of research as passive settings for the social interplay between researcher and researched (Evans et al, 2012) rather than seeing the research encounter as a place-based and place-making process. By contrast, we use Doreen Massey's suggestion that places, like people, have multiple identities with place and people bound together in distinct but co-constitutive trajectories.

In this context we bring together sociology, geography and development studies literatures and draw on the fieldwork experiences from our ESRC-funded project *Living Multiculture*[2] to make three contributions. First, while the concept of over-research carries some justifiably negative connotations, we reflect on the possibility of more positive readings of apparently disproportionate research encounters.

Second, given that most critiques of over-research treat places as mere containers for social relations, the first step in understanding how sustained research

encounters can be productive is to develop a more relational analysis of the geographies of research. The places where we have conducted work – in this case the London Borough of Hackney - are not simply backgrounds or settings for people and communities but are, rather, animating forces in the research process; they have identities, topographies, associations, and histories which particularly invite the attention of social researchers. Places are also sites of attachment for the people who live there which generates particular ethical tensions about the role of researchers in representing those places. As we were residents of the areas we studied as well as researchers in them this ethics of care for places was especially acute.

Third, arising from this, we consider the ways in which social research might be shaped and made more effective when the populations both have a strong sense of place and and a familiarity with social research. In this context the paper reflects on the ways in which some of our participants were 'savvy' in using our presence and attention for their own place-making agendas. In this context we are mindful of research as a co-productive process between researchers and research subject (Beebeejaun et al. 2013; Kindon 2007) as well as Michael Burawoy's (2005: 4) emphasis on sociology as involving multiple engagements with 'multiple publics'.

The paper begins by addressing some of the debates about over-research and argues for an approach that identifies place as more than just a setting for research encounters and examines the possibility that research projects can contribute in positive ways to place-making and sustainable research processes. The next part of the paper details our research project and how we ended up researching in Hackney, focusing on its 'allure' as a place to study cultural diversity and social change. Then we reflect on our relationships with Hackney and our respondents and the extent to which they were adept at engaging with us based on prior experience with research/ers. We use these experiences to suggest that repeated research attention may be reconfigured as positive research encounters rather than a process of extraction and researcher control.

2. On placing and problematizing the concept of over-research

Why place

While it has been noted that the phenomenon of 'over-research' is under-researched (see Sukarieh and Tannock 2013: 494) it has attracted some interdisciplinary and international commentary (see Clarke 2008 for example). However, this commentary tends to focus on the ways in which particular populations and communities attract disproportionate research attention rather than the places and locations themselves. In their arguments about over-research Sukarieh and Tannock (2013: 496) suggest 'it can happen anywhere' because it is poor, minority, deviant, indigenous, crisis experiencing, resilient communities that attract the attention of social researchers. In short, places become over-researched as an outcome of the over-research of particular populations.

That the same groups (and thereby places) can be the focus of repeated study may in turn reinforce wider assumptions and stigmatisation. Academic reputation may play into this if a 'pioneer' researcher undertakes a study, which inspires others to 'test' or update the original. Such places may become iconic creating a self-fulfilling cycle of new researchers (Gallaher, 1964; Crow 2013). Many over-researched places are also geographically or politically 'accessible' (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2013). For example, simply being proximate to a university increases an area's propensity to be researched while in the global South Chambers (1983) noted a 'spatial bias' in terms of a preference for urban locations and/or those closer to tarmac roads. Crucially, these interpretations tend to construct place as passive, a contextual setting for marginalised or easily identifiable social groups. In much the same way as 'community' came to denote a bounded and uniform social grouping (Evans et al, 2012) there is a danger that 'setting-based' approaches to place and community may flatten the 'distinct trajectories' that 'co-exist' (Massey 2005: 9) within places - the heterogeneity of populations, complex social difference and the multiple micro-geographies within, as well as broader connections without, places (see also Amin, 2012). The prefix 'over' in over-research presents the practice as necessarily problematic, whereas a differentiated geography of place allows for more sustainable relationship between researcher and researched, recognising the active agency of those with whom we engage and emphasising the ways in which place is made up of heterogenous and often conflicting imaginings, desires and practices. This complexity shapes the 'multiple publics' identified by Burawoy.

A dominant critique of over-research is that repeated attention results in participants literally getting tired of answering similar questions from successive cohorts of researchers. For example, talking of Liverpool, Moore (1996) recounts how 'research fatigue had set in in certain well studied zones as the local residents were only too willing to tell the fieldworker'. Social researchers may also only have a rudimentary knowledge of the research locality so appear naïve or detached, which reinforces the sense that researchers are driven by different agendas to the people they are researching. In turn, this produces frustration, because, despite high levels of research attention, there is little evidence of positive change or policy intervention (Clarke, 2008; Beebeejaun *et al,* 2013). This raises the perennial ethical question of benefits from the research, but also emphasises the gaps between the outcomes and the purpose and stated aims of social research.

The lacuna between the experience of being involved in research and research impacts, benefits and social change might be addressed in more participatory multi-directional and engaging research approaches (de Leeuw et al, 2012; Burawoy, 2005; Minkler, 2005). This 'family' of approaches are aimed at addressing social marginalisation and in development studies have been labelled 'participatory development' (Hickey and Mohan, 2005) and in social policy as 'community-based research' (Hollander, 2009). Described as "both a philosophy and a research methodology" (Castleden et al, 2012: 156) the animating ethos of these approaches is 'participation, research and action' (Minkler, 2005: ii) such that "knowledge production needs to be collaborative and relational; process-based rather than outcome-based inquiry is vital; and the merits of qualitative research abound" (Leeuw *et al*, 2012: 182). Some treat such approaches (Beebeejaun *et al,* 2013; Crow, 2013) as more likely to avoid over-research, because participants have some agency defining the research agenda and have a stake in the wider outcomes of the research. However, the critical literature on participation (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Mohan, 1999; 2007) suggests that these approaches are not straightforwardly the solution for disrupting inequalities while wider social and political divisions remain intact and research remains extractively orientated.

The focus of engagement of 'participatory research', tends to be on marginalised populations (poor, less educated, rural, disenfranchised, young etc.) and with an explicit social justice mission to transform such conditions. Our political motivations, while normatively concerned with multicultural co-existence, were not

action research based in the same way. Another key difference is that we were primarily working with less marginalised populations and had a focus on experiential relationships of diversity with socially complex localities. Our case study areas – described later – were all experiencing economic growth and/or gentrification. That is not to say we did not witness and seek to examine processes of conflict or marginalization, but the need to 'hand over' the epistemological baton, in Chambers' (1997) words, to poor and relatively uneducated people was not our concern. Indeed, as we discuss, the parity between researched and researcher partly explains participant confidence around the research. Given these distinctions, we orientated ourselves within co-productive approaches – i.e. recognizing first, the knowledges brought by participants to research teams and second, the process of generating data through researched-researcher interaction and dialogue (Beebeejaun *et al,* 2013; Larner 2015).

Places and re-presentations of places
Beyond the research encounter itself research generally produces a series of written artefacts that circulate in different networks. In re-studies in particular it was knowledge of the first round of studies by the communities concerned that prompted anxiety about (and animosity to) later studies. Gallaher's (1964) discussion of revisiting James West's 1945 Plainville study highlighted the tensions that arose because residents knew of West's book. They were angry about how they had been represented, with West emphasising the more negative aspects of the town. Fifty years on the Gallaher study still offers a potent example of the ambivalent nature of the relationship between researchers and the places in which research is conducted, and shows that research plays a role in the making of place identities; in this case a defensive reaction to a negative representation. It is worth noting in passing how few sociological studies anonymise their geographical settings (see for example Stacey 1960; Savage et al 2005).

Ethical dilemmas about the extent to which research is (non-anonymously) placed are generally absent and if the naming of places avoided this is more likely to reflect a concern about how to best to maintain the anonymity of participants or to try to capture a universalism as in the Lynds' (1959) Middletown studies rather than to

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protect places themselves. Gallaher (1964) discussed the construction of 'the anthropologist' by Plainville residents as 'the outsider' purveying 'universal' knowledge and truths (Haraway 1988). This was compounded by the fact that he came from a distant university and only stayed in Plainville while collecting data. This is clearly a cautionary tale as to researchers' relationship to places and the perceptions of researchers by 'locals' – something we address below, given that we were simultaneously 'researchers' and 'locals'.

The onus of the studies of over-research is generally placed on the social researchers; that they bear the responsibility (and with it the blame) for the intrusive knowledge gathering, the negative representations, and the lack of visible improvement. Yet Sukarieh and Tannock (2013) and Crow (2013) both mention the links between media interest in certain places and academic research. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Royal Geographical Conference and also received a degree of media interest in its representation of Hackney (*Times Higher Education Supplement* 29.08.2014). A similar process occurs in policy discourses, where some places become emblematic of a particular process (Mohan, 2001). We suggest that a bundle of 'external' representations accumulates to create a sense of over-research rather than simply academic research, and that these representations can sedimented to become an established (and often unchallenged) set of truths. These representations also generate iconic places that attract successive generations of researchers, drawn to their interesting, controversial or media-worthy reputations. Research (and representation/knowledge creation more generally) contributes to place identity, sometimes because it galvanises people to 'defend' their places in the face of negative representation (the Gallaher/West debate), but also in that research accounts may create an 'allure' for on-going rounds of research projects.

A critical focus on the 'extractive' power of the researchers in the social research process can obscure more complex hierarchies in research relationships. In their reflections on researching elites Neal and McLaughlin (2009) found that even in stratified settings power moved in unpredictable ways between the researcher and researched. In the Shatila refugee camp, too, Sukarieh and Tannock (2013) note

minor subversions as participants acknowledged purposefully 'lying' to researchers to protect themselves and their communities. Rankin (2009) has also examined how research participants resisted the external agendas of development professionals at the same time as using the political resources made available by external interventions. And, as our opening anecdote suggests, sustained interactions with researchers may themselves give people the confidence and 'know how' to make such demands. By framing the issue as one of 'extraction' of information the critical over-research literature implicitly treats places as fixed and homogenous. For example, Sukarieh and Tannock (2013) show that not all people in Shatila were against the researchers because of what they saw as potential benefits, both personal and social, from the research process. It is to place-making processes and the constructed localities of our research that we now turn.

3. The project's locations and its spatial logics

The *Living Multiculture* project takes as its starting point the increasing complexity of ethnic diversity in contemporary urban England. This complexity is both social and spatial; the social mobility of established, once migrant BME communities, the arrival and settlement of new, highly diverse global flows of migrants, and the rise of mixed ethnicity households and mixed ethnicity populations. These emergent social complexities have produced dispersed geographies of ethnic settlement as more places have become more multicultural and already multicultural places have become more so. In this context we selected Oadby, an affluent suburb on the edges of Leicester with a rapidly increasing South Asian middle class population; Milton Keynes, a city that has grown dramatically since its designation as a new town in the late 1960s, and which has until relatively recently been overwhelmingly white British and predominantly working class but now has one of the fastest growing Black African populations in the UK; and the London Borough of Hackney which has a long history of migration, diversity and socio-economic disadvantage, but more recently has seen the arrival of new migrants playing into this existing diversity alongside rapid gentrification by urban middle classes. In this way we characterise our three localities as suburban multiculture (Oadby); newly multicultural (Milton Keynes) and super-diverse multiculture (Hackney).

Focusing on these distinctive cases allows a comparative approach as well as emphasising the connective and dynamic nature of multiculture. While each tells its own story about social change and ethnicity, taken together they also reflect a wider narrative of the new formations of urban multiculture. Our intention was to focus on these emergent ethnic geographies and to investigate how rapid ethnic change is negotiated and experienced in everyday life in these particular places. To capture 'placed' everyday life the project observed in and recruited participants through three key micro sites – public and semi-public spaces (parks, libraries, chain cafes); 6th form colleges and social-leisure groups (sports, gardening, coffee morning and creative writing groups).

Beyond these spatial logics members of the research team had our own residential and/or work place connections with the project's three geographies. We are mindful of the criticism of over-research that researchers' focus on the most (easily) accessible places. However, we suggest that our own place relationship created an additional layer of place responsibility and reflexive connectivity as we discuss below. We also combine under- and over- researched spaces; while Oadby and Milton Keynes have not attracted disproportionate research attention, Hackney certainly has. Some of this research attention reflects Hackney's old and continuing identity as a place of migrant settlement. The 2011 Census data show an increasingly diverse Hackney population with significant migrant flows from Eastern Europe and Nigeria and a White British population approximately a third of the Borough's population (36.2%). While these migration settlements create an intensely complex local population Hackney is not alone in this migration experience. We consider next what else may explain Hackney's appeal to researchers and social commentators.

4. Symbolic locations and the research appeal of Hackney

Some of Hackney's seduction of social researchers can be understood in terms of it being a 'symbolic location' (see Gilroy, 1987). These are particular locations that hold accumulated sets of political and cultural associations. These are often historical and may relate to particular events or they may reflect a broader set of emotional resonances that imbue a place with particular, often charged, meaning/s.

Hackney can be understood as a symbolic location for a number of reasons. It has a long history of dissidence and community-based campaigns around education, housing, policing and health care. It was at the heart of the anti-racist controversies and politics of the 1980s (Lansley et al 1989) and it has been a place of riots and unrest in the 1980s and again in 2011. In part Hackney has become symbolic of the 'deep urban', an oppositional urban politics, and for community organisation because of its *social* as much as its ethnic mix. Hackney is currently the third most deprived Borough in England (www.hackney.gov.uk) but it also has an established urban middle class population which has contributed to the highly socially differentiated residents sharing proximate geographies.

In 1985 Wright wrote of 'this hardpressed inner city area' changing and the sounds of 'reggae and funk in the air' mixed with 'the quiet purring' of 'consumer durables along with the resounding bangs and crashes of middle class […] house renovation' (225-6). In the last ten years this mix of poverty and affluence intensified as gentrification processes became more widespread. While Hackney may not quite be at the levels of super-gentrification identified by Butler and Lees (2006) in the neighbouring Borough of Islington it is beginning to exhibit similar polarisation – 2011 Census data show Hackney as one of the areas of inner London in which the White British category increased. While there has been much analysis of Hackney's rapid gentrification processes (e.g. Sinclair, 2009; Butler and Robson, 2003; Butler and Hamnett, 2011) our point here is to note that these shifting social-economic patterns are enhancing the complexity of Hackney and generate a seductive environment for researchers and commentators.

Our own presence in the borough adds to this crowding and we join a long list of scholars not to mention social commentators, writers, and artists (see, for example, Baron, 1963; Sinclair, 2009) who are drawn to researching in and on Hackney. A (non-exhaustive) list of research texts on and/or based in Hackney would include Butler, 1997; Butler and Robson, 2003; Butler and Hamnett, 2011; Jones, 2013a,b; Kulz, 2013; Neal et al, 2015; Vincent, 1996; Rhys-Taylor, 2013; Vincent and Ball, 2008; Reay, 2007; Reay et al, 2011; Wessendorf, 2014; Wright, 1984). This extent of the list in itself is significant and indicative of the way in which Hackney works as a focus of research attention. Following Sukarieh and Tannock (2013) who used a basic bibliographic analysis of Shatila to demonstrate how it is over-represented in academic research compared to other refugee camps in

Palestine, we used an equivalent exercise of social science work conducted on Hackney. This showed that of the 12 Inner London Boroughs Hackney ranked 3rd in terms of social science articles referring to Hackney in the title or the abstract over the past 20 years. The highest in this sample was Westminster indicating political science articles that dealt with the UK's parliament. Re-running the search using all 32 London Boroughs and cross referring to race, ethnicity and multiculture yielded similar results with Hackney coming 4th in a leading cluster including Tower Hamlets and Lambeth.

Rather than simple over-research we suggest that the disproportionate attention given to Hackney reflects the complex layers and multi-dimensionality of the place itself. In other words the bibliographic rankings and list of researchers tells us one thing but the different foci of the various work cited here testifies to the range of the (albeit intersecting) issues - gentrification, education, local policy making, multiculture, migration, class - being scrutinised by academics in the borough. This variety returns us to some of the issues we discussed earlier; in changing and complex urban environments perhaps there cannot be too much research. Although Hackney may be a disproportionately researched space, no single research project can adequately identify and capture the polysemic complexities and heterogeneities of places and their populations. . In this context, we turn next to consider how far we were able positively to manage our presence in Hackney.

5. Researching in a crowded research site
Complex places and appropriate fieldwork approaches
Back (2013: 28) argues for more craft-ful research practices that are able to 'move with the social world and develop multiple vantage points from which empirical accounts are generated'. Influenced by this notion of 'multiple vantage points' the *Living Multiculture* project used a combination of qualitative ethnographically inflected approaches. These have involved members of the team in sustained participant observation and multiple forms of interviewing with ethnically diverse participants in the project's three locations. Approximately 600 hours of observation were conducted in the project's various sites, spending lingering time in cafes, libraries, parks, 6th form colleges as well as conducting much more active,

participant observations in which members of the team joined and became part of local social-leisure groups e.g. playing tennis with the sports group, going to gardening events with the gardening group, doing creative writing with the writing group, joining park based fitness 'boot camps', having a project stall at park and community events, and so on.

In this context we describe our observation work as being both 'immersion at a distance' and 'interactive immersion'. It (as well as a range of other strategies) helped us to recruit an ethnically diverse participant population who were willing to be involved in the project. In terms of consent and anonymity for all the interviews we secured informed formal consent from our participants. For the observation and participant observation work there were of two kinds of consent gained. In public spaces such as parks and libraries and in the college spaces we gained consent from the management teams for these spaces but users of the spaces were not aware of our presence. For the more active participant observation where we joined leisure groups we gained consent from those members who were part of the organisations and made them aware we were present as researchers. These leisure groups welcomed us although there were conditionalities as we discuss below. We used our group membership to build up sustained contact and drew on this to invite group members to become participants in the project's interview processes.

The interviews with participants were initially one-to-one and biographically oriented. Participants were then invited to become part of a series of repeated group interviews. Central to this design was an attempt to develop a familiar, evolving but non-intrusive research-researcher relationship developed through sustained and repeated contact (Back and Puwar, 2013: 11). In total our participants had four interview contacts with the team. It was the repetition of interviewing that developed our empirical attentiveness and at the same time produced senses of sociality and intimacy within the interview groups. The repeated interview contact meant that while we did not know our participants well, we did know them and they began to know each other. Brought into conversational being by associations with parks, attendance at an educational institution, being a member of a social-leisure group and their willingness to participate in the project group interviews became sites of familiarity and sociality.

This experience of sociality resonates with Sinha's and Back's (2014) advocacy of a dialogic research relationship in which exchange more than extraction characterises the research encounter. The convivial intra-group dynamics that characterised the project's group interviews are difficult to convey in writing or to discern by reading the conversation 'flattening' that happens in transcripts. While the non-discursive communications - smiles and nods as people spoke in interviews – are absent from the transcripts the regular inclusion of 'laughter' in the them hints at the social nature of the interviews themselves. But it is the unrecorded conversations of participants saying goodbye and expressing sadness that it is the end of the contact that testifies to the ways in which the research process has, at times, merged research and social worlds.

Put differently the research process itself became part of a locally embedded – if temporary – process of co-produced conviviality. Some of this took an obvious form; an affable sociality built on connective experiences of lives lived in shared place. But there was also a less obvious conviviality in which an ethnically and socially diverse group of people, who sometimes know each other (as in the case of leisure organisations and sometimes colleges) but more often were unknown to each other (parks and colleges), come together in the group interview settings and negotiate uncertainty and strangeness as well as tensions, as participants told particular stories which were intensely place-based (memories of a park festival, a pub that had closed, a new shop that has opened, an argument in a street, a conversation with a neighbour, an housing estate that had been redeveloped). This convergence of sociality, tension, place and the negotiation of cultural difference are present in this example from the group interview with the writers group in Hackney:

> ***Jake*** *(a young, African-Caribbean man, long term Hackney resident): Okay, in Stamford Hill [an area of the Borough with significant Charedi Jewish community] I might get dirty looks. I might get people crossing the street holding their handbags and what-not (murmurs of agreement) but there was that one really nice Jewish man that helped me push my car on the day when I wanted to cry and that's like a really nice thing and it kind of helps you to not see just, erm, a group of people who are unfriendly but maybe try and understand and see you know/*

> **Naomi** (a mid-age, Jewish woman, long term Hackney resident):
> *Can I take away that stereotype? Because I'm Jewish. And*
> *although I'm not Orthodox I can understand that community and*
> *they're not looking down on you* (Creative Writers Group
> Hackney, August 2013).

Jake's vignette, and Naomi's response, are illustrative of the complex and ambivalent racialised interactions which we heard in many of the Hackney interviews. In the interview with a women's running group the group members an account given by a white English participant of being told to 'go back to Kensington[3]' by an African-Caribbean man she bumps into with her umberella in the street is responded to mostly with sympathy by the rest of the group. What this and the extract above also speak to the ways in which the group interviews generated particular collective conversations about places.

So, for example, elsewhere in the Creative Writers interview the group collectively wonders on the apparent contradiction between the high number of betting shops and the high number of boutique cafes in the borough, and in the park group interview the mention of snow and the way in which lots of people come to the park to then sledge down its one hilly slope gave rise to sharing sledging memories and prompted others local stories. In all our interviews a sense of place was a dominant trope in participants' accounts and Hackney was worried over and/or reflected on as participants spoke about the ways in which they felt the borough was undergoing rapid social change particularly in terms of its gentrification. While we do not have the space to discuss this further (see Neal *et al,* 2015 and Jones *et al,* 2015) the sustained encounter of our research design allowed us not only to listen more often to participants but also to *hear* about place in narratives more clearly.

Research encounters in a crowded research site
We have emphasised how our research design and methods focussed on location, immersion and listening and argued that this assembling and blending of methods is a way to acknowledge and reflect on Hackney both as a socially complex site and as one that is research-busy. We now turn to the ways in which we were responded to as a research team in Hackney. There were different forms of research encounter

that connected to related senses of either research familiarity or research fatigue – and sometimes a mix of both.

The first response was what we can best describe as a research '*savviness*', which reflects the informed agency of our participants but also a sense of Hackney as place. This savviness was most apparent in the work that the researchers did with the ethnically and socially mixed creative writers group . The group was inspired and organised by Devon, a middle-aged, African-Caribbean man, and long term Hackney resident. Hackney was seen as being very much part of the group's local embeddedness – the group met in Hackney, the group members were local or had strong Hackney connections and Devon, the group facilitator, had a strong Hackney affinity which connects to the notion of symbolic locations and the ways in which places have iconic associations. Devon negotiated carefully about the writers' group being part of the project. He stressed that it was not only important to be clear about the nature of the project and what involvement entailed, but also that researchers would not be able to drop in briefly, do the interviews and disappear again. Devon's negotiation meant we developed an embedded and extended engagement with the group.

This allowed Cxxx, the project's Research Associate, to become familiar with the group members while the group members got to know Cxxx and decide if they wanted to talk to her. Cxxx atteded a whole series of group meetings and fully participated in listening to and commenting on the writing exercises. She also wrote pieces for the group nto comment on. It was only after spending this sort of qualitative time and engagement with the group that Cxxx could begin the interviewing process.   Participation was a feature of our research approach in other areas, too, but it was in Hackney that the expectations were highest because the group members – and Devon in particular – were sufficiently familiar with research ethics and research relationships to set the terms for our participation.

The second response we identify was a *critical approach* to the value of social research. While this was not a common experience in our research in Hackney (or the other two places) it was perhaps implicit in the conditions set by the writers' group. And it was more explicitly articulated by members of our Hackney Advisory Group who stressed the need to focus on poverty and deprivation within the

borough and the importance of not letting these 'older' social problems become marginalised in the 'newer' noise about gentrification, new migrants and the rapidity of place change. For example, in an articulation of Massey's explanation of place our Advisory Group (AG) meeting notes (8th Feb 2013) record that, '*Theresa asked about where the more 'traditional' Hackney residents were in our research – i.e. white, working class Eastenders. This raised the issue in the AG of how you define Hackney and what is meant by authentic or original Hackney-ites. AG members suggest there are many 'Hackneys' and one group may place themselves as the 'real' Hackney-ites compared to some newcomers. Reena added to the discussion that 'born and bred' Hackney people could equally well mean Caribbean heritage people (or others) as much as white*'

The critical approach to social research was also voiced by some of the policy-related participants whom we interviewed. These interviews took place in each of the three case study areas and involved a range of local government, Third Sector, and community mobiliser/activist figures with whom we engaged in a dialogue about the project's findings, their own work and their perspectives on place, diversity and sharing everyday spaces. In one of these policy interviews the participant directly raised the issue of the number of social researchers working in Hackney:

> '*Without wanting to sound awkward or anything, but we get a lot of people who come in and want to research Hackney, but what sort of legacy do they leave apart from wanting to come in and publish and then take to a different academic community? But there are lots of groups which could benefit from access to…research expertise that cannot pay for it*' (Local authority officer, Hackney Council, July 2014).

The concern expressed here is about academic extraction of data from a particular place and population without longer-term reciprocity but it is also reflects a sense that social research is a potentially valuable co-productive process and resource. This critique of the social research being undertaken in Hackney was not targeted at us *per se* and these were people who were willing to engage with our project but that it was raised in the interview conversation is significant. This questioning of what gets delivered back to Hackney from all the research activity reflects not simply an awareness of the extent to which researchers are drawn to the Borough but also

awareness of one of the key requirements of research ethics i.e. that social research should be a socially beneficial process (ESRC, 2012).

The third research relationship in Hackney relates to the *confident engagements* we had with many of the policy participants. It is worth noting that in relation to the discussions of difference and diversity in the Hackney transcripts, more so than in the other places we studied, the participants do 'difference talk'. As we noted many of our participants were highly educated, often professionals. Confident discussion of diversity and locality as a research conversation was apparent in the ways in which policy participants spoke about their work, current agendas and emergent visions of the ways in which Hackney had and would continue to successfully manage and capitalise on its diversity. For example, in the same interview with the officer quoted above, she explained,

> *The council probably more so, but that's the position that the mayor*
> *[also] takes, about how we can bridge [lives] in everyday ways and*
> *that's important. And we think about what is needed to help different*
> *people, who have different financial or social circumstances, negotiate*
> *and bridge with other people in the community. I think one of the ways*
> *we would hope that there would be some small solutions and some*
> *ideas that would come out of a project like this which help us keep*
> *better an eye on the stuff, the glue, that helps complex communities*
> *live in a good way and a positive way.*

In effect the research encounter delivered a space in which Hackney could be 'show-cased' and the borough's defining identification with diversity rearticulated (see also Jones, 2013). We suggest that our experience of research 'savviness', 'critique' and 'confidence' is a direct consequence of researching in a place that is familiar with being a focus of research attention.

This brings us to our fourth form of encounter: '*ethnography at home'*. We noted earlier the tendency for researchers to focus on the same places, for those places to become iconic and to work as on-going sites of research intrigue. In this context we recognised our own positionality within the research process. Three members of the research team had long-term relationships with Hackney - as residents and as workers. Neal and Walters (2006) and Heley (2011) have argued in the context of

rural studies that the biographic place-relationships that researchers have with their research environments may be connective, shaping researchers' particular understandings of places and their histories, their access, and their knowledge of their selected research sites. Certainly having a Hackney relationship beyond researching in it involves an acknowledgement both of responsibility – an ethics of care for a place - and of bias. While the benefits and pitfalls of insider research have long been a focus of methods thinking the outcome of the emotional and corporeal proximity of the researcher to their research geographies has received less attention (Neal and Walters 2006). Unlike Gallaher's (1964) outsider position in Plainville members of the Living Multiculture team were embedded in the places being researched.

While this may impact on what is heard, what and who is sampled, where the gaze is directed etc. it also has more mundane possibilities, for example, bumping into participants after the fieldwork (nice but slightly awkward). We were aware of more complex affects, too; as researchers and residents we carried or 'held' the research process with us long after the actual research encounter. We have discussed elsewhere (Neal *et al*, 2015) how participants' stories (e.g. Jake's vignette), memories, accounts of 'their Hackney' stayed with us, often coming back into mind, bidden and not, when we are in these same environments, walking through the park, popping by the library, remembering a street that had been the place of an argument, glancing into a pub or cafe that had been mentioned to see who's there. In this way the research localities become 're-known' through the experience of the research encounter and the narratives that emerged from it.

6. Conclusions

In this paper we have sought to develop the conversation about what over-research means and argue for a more nuanced understanding of the concept by bringing into focus understandings of place and participants' (critical) research knowledges.

The critiques of over-research tend to see the research encounter as intrusive and extractive, producing limited social benefit for those communities and people being researched. While we do not disagree, we problematize the extent to which this argument relies on an emphasis on unequal power between researchers and research participants. As with calls to turn the research gaze upwards onto elites

and the powerful the over-research argument tends to work on an interpretation of power as fixed and linear. But, as has been argued elsewhere (see for example Cochrane, 1998; Mohan, 1999; Neal and McLaughlin, 2009), reflections on research engagements with elites have illuminated instabilities and uncertainties about the location of power in research relations. Our emphasis on '*placed*' participants' agency and our orientation towards co-productive research relationships in which we established 'circulations of communication' (Sinha and Back 2014: 473) suggest that disproportionate research attention may allow the development of sustainable forms of research engagement.

Most debates on over-research also focus primarily on research participants as social rather than spatial actors. In emphasising the placed nature of 'over-research' we add spatial considerations to these still rather limited debates.

Clearly, through their multiple histories, identities, and populations, places may have particular auras and associations that attract disproportionate researchers and social commentators. And Ben Gidley[4] is surely right to identify the danger that the extensive research gaze on Hackney may create a 'spectacularisation' of the borough in ways that reinforce the position of 'Hackney' as a symbolic location thus leaving other tensions and contradictions within the borough marginalised or neglected. While we acknowledge these concerns, we suggest that using a relational approach to place provides a counter to any singular or fixed interpretation of place and visibilises research interactions in which the multiplicity of place identity is apparent, as our accounts of participants' diverse and differentiated experiences and senses of Hackney demonstrate. If over-research, as we have argued, also generates a degree of research 'savviness' among those who are subject to the research gaze then listening carefully to and hearing what is being said makes it possible to avoid some of the dangers Gidley identifies, and a reflexive engagement with some of the consequences of over-research may even benefit the research process.

Like Rankin (2009) we have emphasised the role of participants as active, co-productive and 'research knowing'. In our Hackney fieldwork narrative this was most

often expressed in participants' affinities for and care about place; in their willingness to critically our presence as researchers; in their awareness of the relationship between research and a wider benefit; and in an awareness of researchers' ethical practice and social responsibilities. Using our experiences of researching in Hackney we interpreted this agency as evidence of the ways in which our participants were active and skilled in setting the terms of their often convivial but also often highly conditional engagement with us as researchers. As with the residents in Somerstown, a familiarity with social research and its processes meant that participants and publics involved in our project were generally confident and possessed 'research savvy' knowledge. In this context the connections between doing social research and our experiences of research involvement in a crowded research geography particularly resonate with Michael Burawoy's (2004) urging of 'a dialogue with audiences beyond the academy, an open dialogue in which both sides deepen their understanding of public issues'.

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[3] An affluent area of London

[4] Conversation in workshop 'Towards the ethnography of super-diversity', Max Planck Institute, Göttingen, May 2014.