`We are not separatist because so many of us are mixed`: resisting negative stereotypes of neighbourhood ethnic residential concentration

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‘We are not separatist because so many of us are mixed’: resisting negative stereotypes of neighbourhood ethnic residential concentration

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to disrupt the dominant ‘segregation as negative’ narrative, by exploring hopeful experiences and perceptions of ethnic residential concentration. Drawing on fieldwork in an ethnically mixed, working-class inner-city neighbourhood, we critically reflect on recent debates around ethnic segregation, particularly hegemonic and ‘official’ policy discourses that position ethnic concentration as incompatible with social solidarity. Narratives from residents’ in-depth interviews in Liverpool 8 problematise this association, offering alternative interpretations of ethnic concentration. Historically, Black and other racially minoritised communities were spatially confined to this area through endemic structural racism. This accentuated existing class, religious and racial inequalities, leading to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of neighbourhood and community. Neighbourhood challenges to racism help both shape and reinforce allegiance and belonging to the neighbourhood of Liverpool 8. Out of structural discrimination and spatial confinement, a unique identity with place has been forged. This has strengthened perceptions of social solidarity amongst residents and led to a neighbourhood belonging ‘through difference’, not despite the multiple disadvantages residents faced, but, in many ways, because of them. Our findings underscore the value of contextualising the circumstances under which ethnic concentration is (re)created – to appreciate the nuances of its consequences, and how communities respond to them.

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Race/ethnicity; segregation; diversity; discrimination; neighbourhood

Introduction

When I was growing up, most Black people you knew […] who came into the city […] ended up being put in the Liverpool 8 area […]. Everyone got stuck in the Liverpool 8 area. (40–49, male, Black mixed heritage, Muslim)

I would describe [myself] as being from Liverpool 8. I’m really proud of being from Liverpool 8. I wouldn’t live anywhere else (30–39, female, Black)

These two narratives, relayed by residents during fieldwork in a British inner-city neighbourhood, represent in microcosm the differential processes involved in the
creation and maintenance, over generations, of working-class ethnic minority neighbour- 
hood concentration. They are illustrative of the ways in which such influences operate at unequal, yet interwoven, levels. The first narrative represents how systemic discrimination has spatially confined and stigmatised a community, leading to social and economic restraint and the marginalisation of its residents. The second reflects how such structural disadvantage can invoke communities to respond with more authentic, affirmative, and hopeful perspectives around ethnic concentration. Positive perspectives, and the adverse conditions in which they are rooted, have helped shape and reinforce allegiance to neighbourhood, as well as a wider sense of ‘ownership’ and belonging. These accounts, then, epitomise the complex relationship between structure and agency – of the way enforced and discriminatory class and ethnic spatial confinement has contributed to a strong sense of neighbourhood identity, belonging and attachment, rather than fragmentation. These inter-related experiences and processes are the foundation on which our study rests.

Residential racial/ethnic ‘concentration’ has been problematised as a key factor undermining community cohesion and social solidarity (Putnam 2007; Koopmans and Veit 2014); it is claimed to underpin the conditions for increasing mistrust between communities, decreasing opportunities for social mixing, and the apparent ‘fragmentation’ of society (examples include Phillips 2005; HM Government 2018). These persistent negative segregationist discourses have had a profound, and overwhelmingly negative, impact on political, policy and public perceptions of national and local accommodation of ethnic diversity, levels of integration, and the sustainability of a ‘traditional’ British national identity (for further discussion, see Phillips 2007; Finney and Simpson 2009; Catney 2016). This perspective holds neighbourhoods with relatively large Black and other racially minoritised communities as insular, undermining the heterogenous reality of these populations by seeing diversity as existing only when White populations live with ‘others’. Proponents of this position have been heard loud and clear for several decades, yet a strong counter-narrative has demonstrated decreasing ethnic segregation, and increasing inter-ethnic mixing, in neighbourhoods and in schools (e.g. Catney 2016; Harris and Johnston 2020). What unites much of this debate is an implicit assumption that segregation is unconditionally problematic; it is something to be solved, ignored, or celebrated when in decline.

In this article, we aim to consider, through the lens of social injustice, the complex factors that can, under certain conditions, create what Peach (1996) promoted as positive co-ethnic clustering. We grapple with two seemingly conflicting concepts: while dominant portrayals of concentration as negative have served to stigmatise certain communities, neighbourhoods and ethnic groups (Phillips 2007), a ‘rose-tinted spectacles’ conceptualisation of ethnic/racial concentration ignores the deep-rooted structural racisms that have created and reinforced intolerance and inequity. We do not aim to add to the body of research on the positive outcomes of clustering per se (for example, see Merry 2016; Danzer and Yaman 2013; Bertrand, Luttmer, and Mullainathan 2000), but rather we explore some of the historic and contemporary characteristics of people and place that shape these outcomes.

We do this through an in-depth study of a northern English inner-city neighbourhood that has been negatively stereotyped in the public imagination and political rhetoric. Liverpool 8 – also commonly referred to as ‘Toxteth’ or ‘L8’ – is unique in the context
of the wider city, as home to Liverpool’s concentrated and longstanding minority Black African and African-Caribbean settlement, in addition to its high rates of historical interracial mixing (Frost 2008; Small 1991). Ethnic minority concentration over many generations is the outcome of systemic discriminatory processes that have marginalised and confined this diverse community spatially, and thus socially and economically (see Nieuwenhuis et al. 2020 on the relationships between segregation and socio-spatial (im)mobility), whilst also dispersing specific settlements of families and communities as part of recent ‘regeneration’ activity (Phillips 2006). We consider how, out of neighbourhood disadvantage and stigma, residents’ narratives reveal alternative, and affirmative, perspectives, and we explore the nature of these more positive and hopeful responses to ethnic concentration. We concentrate our efforts on several core themes that emerged as significant throughout a period of fieldwork with the Liverpool 8 (L8) community: historic processes of ethnic diversification; neighbourhood pride and belonging; and social solidarity in (place) stigma and (socio-economic) inequalities. Residents’ voices reveal how a common notion of neighbourhood belonging ‘through difference’ creates a unique place identity that strengthens, rather than undermines, perceptions of social cohesion. We discover that, ironically, the very inequalities that act to create and maintain residential concentration have unified a stigmatised community.

Our study is grounded in the specifics of the British policy-political landscape, but, while acknowledging the very different processes of the formation of ethnic residential concentrations in other contexts (such as, for example, the US or other parts of Western Europe), we hope to offer a broad intervention that challenges hitherto dominant perspectives. While the particularities of our study neighbourhood are important, we draw wider conclusions around the ways in which neighbourhood and community might create positive experiences of residential clustering. Building on previous and on-going debates that challenge and disrupt official narratives that problematise ethnic concentration, an additional originality of the paper lies in its central positioning of unheard residents’ voices, the privileging of their narratives to our understanding of inter-ethnic community belonging and integration within L8, and their contribution to alternative and hopeful perspectives.

Segregation and diversity in debate

Written a quarter of a century ago, the late Ceri Peach’s (1996) seminal intervention ‘good segregation, bad segregation’ explores the positive and negative aspects of co-ethnic concentration. He identifies ‘negative segregation’ based on involuntary actions, and characterised by divisiveness, enforcement, and exclusivity – the result of discriminatory policies. These unjust processes and experiences are underscored by inequalities in access to resources, including income, which dictates housing and locational choice and stifies socio-spatial mobility (Hedman, Van Ham, and Manley 2011; Hulchansky 2010). The locational constraints that result from socio-economic disadvantage powerfully intersect with ethnicity. Ethnic minority groups are more likely to experience higher levels of employment (Lancee 2019) and housing discrimination (IRR Statistics 2019; Garvie 2017), and greater inequalities in education and health, compared to the majority White British population (Jivraj and Simpson 2015).
Disadvantage as a cause of spatial segregation is commonly conflated with issues around ‘willingness’ to integrate and the ‘self-segregation’ of some communities (Finney and Simpson 2009; Phillips 2010). Popular and policy narratives relating to the perceived threats of segregation are consistently referenced to disadvantaged (ethnic minority) groups and neighbourhoods (see, for example, Casey 2016; HM Government 2018). The British Muslim community offers a well-documented example, demonised for a purported incompatibility with mainstream British society and reluctance to integrate socio-spatially (Phillips 2006). Such segregationist discourses have been challenged through research which has (i) provided evidence of steadily decreasing ethnic residential segregation (Catney 2016) and (ii) highlighted the structural disadvantages, and high levels of social and economic inequality and injustices, faced by British ethnic minority groups (Kalra and Kapoor 2009). Despite this, such discourses persist within British national integration policy, including the stigmatisation of specific groups, especially newly arrived communities; obscuration of structural inequalities (Dorling 2018; Khan 2020); placing responsibility on Black and other racialised and minoritised (hereafter ‘racially minoritised’) communities for integration by emphasising the problems of segregation in hindering inter-ethnic social mixing; encouragement of mistrust between those of differing backgrounds who are unable to ‘make the most of economic and social opportunities available to them’ (HM Government 2018, 12); as well as (re)creating public panic around ethnic diversity (Finney and Simpson 2009; Phillips 2010), whilst simultaneously reducing provision of integration support (Refugee Action 2019). Policy-political anxiety about ethnic minority concentrated neighbourhoods is arguably fuelled by the assumption that (spatial) assimilation is seen as the only legitimate pathway towards a cohesive society. Peach (1996) cautions against seeing ‘good’ and ‘bad’ segregation as stages on a continuum; ‘bad’ ethnic segregation does not lead to ‘good’ segregation, as based on presumptuous and problematic processes of assimilation.

Importantly, Peach also reminds us that co-ethnic clustering can offer social, economic and cultural benefits for individuals, communities and neighbourhoods. Spatial segregation can result from positive factors, whereby cohesion based on shared cultural values and social and support networks strengthen social solidarity, promoting integration, particularly amongst new immigrant groups (Bolt, Özüekren, and Phillips 2010). This can yield very practical benefits, such as access to housing and employment; the provision and maintenance of culturally specific services, retail and religious institutions; and emotional support and protection from racism (Merry 2016; Bolt, Özüekren, and Phillips 2010; Peach 1996). Ethnic, religious and cultural identities thus become important aspects of neighbourhood belonging. The voluntary concentration of ethnic groups, such as the eruv (Vincent and Warf 2002) in north London, offers an example where (Jewish) residential clustering serves a religious and community desire, and is illustrative of the group’s agency in determining their residential patterns. Class position and social mobility affords greater choice for the more economically advantaged, constituting what Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst (2005) have termed ‘elective belonging’. Elements of social and cultural capital such as education, social networks, and local knowledge, as well as residential preferences, additionally shape voluntary patterns of co-ethnic concentration (Clark and Fossett 2008).

Historic processes of racism, discrimination, and disadvantage in (re)producing patterns of both negative and positive neighbourhood co-ethnic concentration offer a
framework for our study. We argue for the importance of contextualising the circumstances under which such concentration forms. Our language is intentional. We use ‘concentration’ and avoid ‘segregation’ because, as discussed later, our study area is highly ethnically diverse. Yet British policy and political commentary is replete with examples of the conflation of ethnic diversity with segregation, whereby they have become equally feared and demonised in the public imagination as incompatible with a cohesive society. A striking example is provided by Kaufmann and Cantle’s controversial report (2016), which aggregates all racially minoritised groups into one ‘non-White British’ group, to advance the notion that segregation had grown throughout the 2000s. In fact, segregation had decreased, with greater levels of mixing between ethnic groups than ever before (Catney 2016; Catney, Wright, and Ellis 2020). We critically consider the relationships between L8’s multi-ethnic diversity (alongside its working-class character) and integration and explore if place-based stigma undermines residents’ perceptions, and experiences, of social solidarity, or helps to reinforce it.

Liverpool 8

As a legacy of the city’s role in empire and colonialism, L8’s demography has been historically shaped by a constructed and forced concentration of different minority groups, based on racially steered housing policies, informed, and maintained through systemic inequalities and racism (CRE 1984; Frost 1996; Jackson 1987; Nelson 2000; Kundnani 2001). Its population was ‘othered’, grouping all racially minoritised communities into one, and ignoring the between-group mixing that has been a characteristic of L8 since before the mass migrations of 1950s and 1960s (Frost 1996; 2008; Nassy Brown 2005; Small 1991).

Ethnically concentrated neighbourhoods in Liverpool have their origin in mid-nineteenth century overseas trade. The area close to Toxteth Docks or ‘south end’ became home to a mix of Chinese, Irish, Jewish, Arab, African-Caribbean and African peoples, especially seafarers, in the first half of the twentieth century (Frost 1996). Slum clearances in the inter-war period pushed these communities away from the docks and towards the Abercromby and Granby localities once occupied by Liverpool’s merchants and sea captains.

The ethnic minority community remains concentrated in and around this area today. A diversity of British-born and first-generation immigrant ethnic groups that include Black, White, Arab, South Asian, Chinese, and mixed-heritage people, with those of Black (of African and African-Caribbean ancestry) and mixed-Black ancestry (Black with White British and/or Irish, Black and Chinese) historically, as today, constitute the majority of racially minoritised groups in the area. In L8’s Princes Park ward, just over 50% of residents identified with an ethnic minority group in the 2011 Census, while White British constituted the rest, as the single largest ethnic group. Strikingly, more people in this ward identified with a ‘mixed ethnicity’ (around 10%) than anywhere else in the UK. The area is thus highly ethnically diverse, yet, given its large collective ethnic minority population, is also often viewed as ethnically concentrated compared to much of Liverpool.

Historically, ethnic concentration here was reinforced throughout the 1950s and 1960s through exclusion from social housing. Ben-Tovim (in Frost and Phillips 2011, 106–107)
reflects, ‘We were aware of widespread patterns of social exclusion […] from decent council housing […]]. There was certainly a degree of social segregation, with the Black community being confined to specific neighbourhoods’. Nationally, housing policy up until the mid-1970s began to disperse Black and Asian tenants to prevent perceived ‘ghetto-like concentrations’ of racially minoritised groups (Phillips 2006). Alongside segregationist housing policies in Liverpool at this time, individual racially minoritised families from L8 (sometimes the result of arbitrary Compulsory Purchase Orders or ‘slum’ clearance), were allocated social housing on predominantly White estates adjacent to the area or across the city. A result of isolating racially minoritised families in Liverpool (Frost and Catney 2020; CRE 1984) and elsewhere (Kundnani 2001) was that they became targets of racial harassment and violence. Anxieties around safety, a desire for proximity to family and community, and housing affordability, have all contributed to the strengthening of the historical patterns of ethnic residential concentration in L8 (Kundnani 2001; Phillips 2006; Frost and Catney 2020). This can be seen across several generations of Black British and White–Black mixed heritage groups, as well as more recent first-generation migrants.

Buttler and Hamnett’s (2011) research on East London has looked at differential upward social and residential mobility, where the growth of a minority ethnic middle-class is reflected in increased home ownership in the suburbs. We found that it was not uncommon for aspirational individuals who had entered professional work to choose to remain in L8, alongside those who had less choice. There were also suggestions that those who aspired to ‘get on’ had to move out of the city altogether, rather than to another area in Liverpool. As discussed in the findings sections, residents highlighted the stigma of having an L8 postcode, that especially impacted on job applications and even the ability to get insurance, particularly after the 1980s urban unrest.

In the city of Liverpool, increasing inequalities have created high levels of socio-economic segregation, with L8 home to some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the city, and indeed in England (Liverpool City Council IMD 2019). External labels have had a major influence on L8 residents’ opportunities and experiences of place-based stigma. The findings of this study must be positioned within broader national patterns that show how place ‘confinement’ in circumstances of disadvantage perpetuates and sustains social, economic and racial inequalities (Phillips 2006; Kundnani 2001; Smith 1987).

**Methodology**

This research forms part of a wider British Academy funded project which concluded with public exhibitions in the local community library and in the Museum of Liverpool. Insights were garnered from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 16 participants, aged between 18 and 61, with a range of self-identified ethnic and religious backgrounds and a mix of genders, who self-defined as being from or connected to the L8 area. Following an initial purposeful sample of long-standing residents of L8 by a Research Assistant with local knowledge (co-author Vaughn), a snowballing sampling technique was used to include participants who had moved away from, but retained contact with, the neighbourhood, as well as recent newcomers. These three distinct groups link to differential ‘social locations’ (Erel 2011) in terms of gender and class identities; whether ‘migrants’ or British-born ethnic minorities, and whether they were racialized as minorities (some
interviewees were White). The sample size was small but purposeful, eliciting rich and detailed data through the use of a novel mental mapping exercise (see Catney, Frost, and Vaughn 2018). The decision to privilege residents’ narratives rests on the importance of centring the (unheard) voices and perspectives upon which this research is focussed. We were intent on capturing residents’ subjective lived experiences to understand how historic settlement patterns have impacted on residents’ notions of neighbourhood.

A thematic analysis was undertaken, focusing on: belonging; place identity; class and ethnicity; and safety and racism. These dominant themes arise from the neighbourhood’s historical record of welcoming migrants; tackling racist policing; coming together during and after the 1980s unrest; and in hosting large-scale music festivals like Africa Oye, and more recently the Granby4Streets initiative. These expressions are important in demonstrating the links between L8’s diversity and active community engagement, countering negative images and stigma associated with the area. Whilst such displays could be perceived as ‘idealised narratives’, residents also expressed concerns with placed-based challenges, including the ‘problems’ associated with new migrants. Erel’s (2011) work on Peterborough demonstrates how ‘social location’ can be mobilised to contest local and national levels of belonging by establishing the positioning of new migrants alongside established ethnic minority and majority groups; more research in L8 is needed on this.

**Ethnic concentration and collective neighbourhood identity**

The interviews revealed how the enforced concentration of ethnic minority communities into L8, with little spatial integration with other areas of the city, has stifled residents’ mobility, but also shaped and reinforced allegiance to the neighbourhood. These historic processes continue to impact on contemporary experiences of the neighbourhood and wider city. Residents pointed towards ‘spaces of fear’ outside of L8, demarcated by roads or streets that represented clearly defined symbolic borders between their definition of L8 and other neighbourhoods (for discussion of residents’ socio-spatial boundaries, from the wider study’s mental mapping exercise, see Catney, Frost, and Vaughn 2018). Residents discussed how their spatial horizons were limited by vulnerability to racism in the Dingle, a predominantly White deprived neighbourhood that is ‘officially’ part of the L8 area:

> It’s just a no-go area, unless you have to go over, you don’t really go … I think I got called a P*** over there once and I just shouted back, well I’m a n*****, get it right. If you are going to insult me and be racist towards me, at least do it properly so I can at least be offended […] I think there is definitely a racial divide between Toxteth and Dingle (20–29, male, Black mixed heritage)

> L8 stops on Park Road. Even for the lads from Shorefields School, Dingle is still a bad place. But evidently Scotty Road has got leaflets up in windows ‘White only’; not much has changed, it’s got worse. Racism has got ten times worse (50–59, male, White)

Perceptions of such ‘no go’ areas across other parts of the city were commonly shared, with some neighbourhoods gaining notorious reputations through direct or inherited experiences of racism and violence. One resident reflected on his experiences of discrimination whilst growing up, and how this bounded his daily movements:
As a young man, I’d never sort of aspired to stay around the L8 area. You look at the boundaries that we had when we were children and I’d be like, I want to go there. People would tell me, you can’t go past Windsor Street […] You will get beat up. Why? ’Cause you’re Black. You know, so I couldn’t go down Mill Street where I went to school, I couldn’t go into town because, you know, people would be out drinking and stuff like that, I couldn’t go past Wavertree … (40–49, male, Black)

Another resident described how the unprovoked racially motivated murder of Black British teenager Anthony Walker in Huyton in 2005 (see Gadd and Dixon 2018) impacted on the way he negotiated his mobility:

I think I’ve been to every single area in Liverpool, but Huyton. […] I think like subconsciously I’ve stayed away from that area because of what happened to Anthony Walker […] if my friend says we’re hosting a party and I say where, and they say Huyton, I try to find a little excuse not to go […] I might feel like I’m a target to any racist people (18–29, male, Black African)

Both memories and persistent experiences of ‘othering’ and vulnerability to racism in contemporary Liverpool continue to restrict residential mobilities (reinforcing patterns of concentration). Residents avoided specific areas for shopping, socialising, and even work. The low levels of Liverpool-born racially minoritised people working in the city centre supports and reinforces residents’ beliefs that racism is a persistent threat:

 […] the city centre really gets my blood boiling because I go into shops […] the lack of Black and minority groups who should be working in these places […] our city is made up of many different cultures, but our working city doesn’t reflect those different cultures (40--49, male, Black)

Yet while long-standing ethnic minority concentration in L8 has created and supported these persistent barriers to mobility, the protective effects of co-ethnic concentration against racism and discrimination (Bolt, Özüekren, and Phillips 2010) are strongly felt by its residents. It is L8’s ethnic diversity that was repeatedly expressed as synonymous with safety, tolerance and acceptance. One resident reflected on how painful experiences of being moved out to social housing in a predominantly White neighbourhood (after the family home was compulsory purchase ordered) had resonated with others, compelling these families to move back to L8 as soon as an opportunity arose:

I found a sense of identity in Toxteth, a sense of togetherness, […] the people I was gravitating towards had had a similar experience to me – they too had been sent out to Halewood, Kirkby, Garston, Speke, Huyton, Ormskirk, Skelmersdale, Runcorn all these places, and they were coming back to Toxteth the same way as I did […] we were all Black, all individually scarred by our experiences in White areas and all trying to come back together […] each of us had characteristically similar but unique and distinct experiences in the different places we had been to (40–49, male, Black mixed heritage, Muslim)

Another resident explained her return to L8 for the sake of her children’s well-being:

I went back to live in Liverpool 8 with my children because I know racism can exist anywhere, but I think the likelihood of it happening […] is a lot less likely when you’re living in a diverse area such as Liverpool 8. That was the ultimate reason why I moved to Liverpool 8 with my kids (40–49, Female, Black mixed heritage)
These sentiments around diversity as safety continue to influence residents’ perceptions of some areas outside L8:

[...] I suppose I’m a bit wary of over there [Halton, Wirral], [...] I think when I go to North Liverpool or Halton or the Wirral, [...] I’m waiting and expecting for something to happen just because those areas aren’t as diverse (20–29, male, Black mixed heritage)

Experiences of racism have strengthened place attachment by offering safety and acceptance, as well as playing a significant symbolic role in nurturing residents’ sense of belonging. Place attachment links with bonds formed during upbringing (particularly in deprived communities characterised by stronger allegiance to place and less mobility, see Lane 1987) but in L8 this suggests something more. This was particularly striking since not everyone interviewed grew up in L8, some having moved to the area later in life. For many residents, place attachment was about the importance of the acceptance of diversity, the ‘sense of community’, social relationships, and the connectedness they found in the area: ‘it was more than just a postcode [...] well, it’s just got more warmth to it. I feel totally safe there. I can be myself’ (60–69, female, mixed heritage Jewish and Chinese); ‘Liverpool 8 to me? home [...] the cradle of good-hearted people, and we will do anything for anybody and people know this’ (50–59, male, Black mixed heritage); ‘Liverpool 8 – I just feel safe and secure in that area, [...] anything goes in terms of no matter who you was, or whatever your identity, there’s a place for you there and that makes me feel good as well (50–59, male, White).

Indeed, expressions of belonging to L8 were strongly linked to the neighbourhood’s multi-ethnicity and of the richness and longevity of historical inter-racial mixing long before the Windrush generation:

My mum is Jamaican, full. My Dad is a typical Liverpool 8 person in a sense that he’s got a Chinese Granddad, an African Granddad and two white Nans – White English and White Irish. [...] We’re quite mixed (30–39, female, Black)

[...] I’m about a quarter White so I wouldn’t see myself as White/Black. I’m half Black and then I’m half Chinese and White [...] [...] my Chinese Great Grandfather came here as a sailor, [...] my Dad’s Granddad was from Sierra Leone, from the Kru tribe (18–29, female, Black)

Residents also emphasised how ethnic diversity was not just accepted and ‘normalised’ in L8, but had indeed become synonymous with the neighbourhood: ‘growing up, I had a White mate, Somali mate, Black mate, a mate with dreadlocks – we all looked different’ (30–39, female, Black); ‘The basis of L8 to me is people who are all different … Most of the people who I knew were of mixed race, Somali, Nigerian or Ghanaian backgrounds or English backgrounds, so it was a mixture’ (18–29, female, Black); ‘Everyone is an immigrant in that area [L8] or descended from immigrants [...] the fact that they come to the area and the fact that they stay, says a lot’ (20–29, male, Black mixed heritage). ‘Difference’ has become a unifying identity rooted in place: ‘I definitely feel at home in L8, [...] Fitting in to L8 is based on everyone being different, so it’s hard not to fit in [...]’ (18–29, female, Black). ‘[...] we are not separatist, because so many of us are so mixed. We don’t have, like, an Asian area, Somali area, etc., like in Manchester or Birmingham – they don’t really mix. We are just Liverpool 8. [...] (30–39, female, Black). One resident identified L8’s changing and dynamic nature in terms of its ability to
absorb, over successive generations, waves of new migrant communities that add to existing or more established ones:

I’d say the old communities are the African and Caribbean communities, I think the middle communities are the Somalian and some of the Arabic and Pakistanis, and the new communities are the Polish and Czech and Eastern Europeans (20–29, male, Black mixed heritage)

Pemberton and Phillimore’s (2018) research on super-diverse urban neighbourhoods found ‘ideal’ migrant place-making in Birmingham (amongst established and newly arrived migrants) that helped sustain non-migrant populations. Here, no single ethnic group predominates (also see Wessendorf 2014), and shared diversity and neighbourhood identity over generations was rooted in experiences of discrimination. In contrast, the study also found recent diversity in Kensington (Liverpool 7), alongside higher levels of population churn that had resulted in a weaker identity and place-based affinity. Like L8, both Birmingham and Kensington saw new migrants and racially minoritised people actively seeking out more racially mixed areas. Moreover, a ‘commonplace diversity’ (Wessendorf 2014) of greater mixing and blending results in an ‘invisibility’ in diverse neighbourhoods (Pemberton and Phillimore 2018). While ethnic diversity in L8 was acknowledged as a unifying feature, the shared Black heritage of many residents (part of the legacy of enforced ethnic residential concentration) was also important: ‘[…] coming as migrants, this was where we were told to move to; that’s how it was. This was where all the Black people lived .’ (30–39, female, Black Nigerian).

**Discrimination, disadvantage, and diversity**

It was clear that the strong sense of neighbourhood identity and belonging through difference was not despite the multiple disadvantage’s residents faced, but, in many ways, because of them. As two interviewees commented:

Liverpool 8 is a unique part of Britain […]. It’s got so much character and so much has gone against it in terms of poor people being put in and set up with nothing really, and neglected. […] a unique kind of enthusiasm comes from people - like a proudness that they come from Liverpool 8, that no one’s better than you and you are as equal as anyone else and have just as much rights and stuff like that. (40–49, male, White)

I was seeing people from mixed race families who looked like me. Who had a Black father but looked like me. […]. It was great. It had its problems […] poverty and education and housing … [but] there was a community there […] that didn’t judge me and […] encouraged me to be me, that was just fantastic as a young person growing up. (50–59, female, Mixed heritage Irish and Chinese)

Subjective notions of belonging and acceptance inside L8 appeared to contrast markedly with the ‘othering’ experienced outside the neighbourhood. In addition to the historic, and some would suggest ongoing, stigma attached to the wider city of Liverpool (Scraton 2007), L8 has endured place stigma within Liverpool (Butler 2019; Frost and Catney 2020). Much of this revolves around the area’s concentrated Black settlement, urban unrest in the 1980s and 2011, safety and crime, and high levels of deprivation. Residents’ awareness of the way the media invokes place stigma, and of the damage this can inflict through erecting barriers to opportunities, was clearly expressed:
[...] it has had a rough time, Liverpool, in regard to insurance for property and cars and access to education and housing, [...]. I’ve worked in areas with far more high crime [...] but because Liverpool 8 is an area that was Black, and it’s Toxteth, it’s been labelled (50–59, female, Pakistani, Muslim)

[...] anything that happens in Liverpool 8 is highlighted in the Echo [local newspaper] [...] actually it’s called Toxteth in the press [...]. If there’s a gun fired in Dingle, it’s called Toxteth [...] when really it’s not, that gunshot was in Dingle [...] But anything good happens in Dingle, then it’s Dingle not Toxteth. (50–59, male, Black mixed heritage)

Interviewees commented on postcode stigma and its impact on employment prospects, with one resident reporting how she had advised her children to use their Grandmother’s postcode (outside of L8) when applying for jobs. Another resident reflected on the stigma and assumptions made about those from L8 when growing up, and how she was forced to embrace it, as a way of enduring racism:

I experienced [the] worse racism [...] I lived in that school with a persona that wasn’t me, [...] I very much lived up to the stereotype [...] acting up to this idea of people from Toxteth, for my own survival [...] in that environment I had to be you know – bad arse! [...] they’d be like ‘bet you’ve got a crew in Toxteth’ and I’d be laughing in my mind - me with a crew! A crew! I just like go home and dance to Britney Spears in my bedroom! But [...] I’d let them think it because if they thought that I was in some way dangerous, then they weren’t going to harm me. (18–29, female, Black)

Defending diversity

Like other marginalised working-class neighbourhoods that have been stigmatised (Slater and Anderson 2012; McKenzie 2015), residents in L8 have responded with alternative narratives of belonging to place and neighbourhood, with a strong sense of pride and place attachment (see also Frost and Catney 2020): ‘People have worked hard and are very passionate about losing the stigma associated with Toxteth, that stigma is still there, yes very much so [...]’ (40–49 female, Black mixed heritage).

Class and racial inequality, deprivation and place-based stigma have in turn fed into a shared history of local struggles and activism. Identity and belonging to neighbourhood have been buttressed through this history of activism, particularly amongst the older generations who, in the past, rallied against local injustices around police racism and harassment, and discriminatory social housing and public sector employment practices (Frost and Phillips 2011; Gifford, Brown, and Bundey 1989; Liverpool Black Caucus 1986).

Middle and older generations are, in many ways, the ‘collective memory’ of the community, where direct or indirect experiences have helped cement a particular perspective of the neighbourhood. A greater sense of exclusion and discrimination amongst the older generation was relayed through historical personal experiences; for example, of being chased by gangs of skinheads outside the symbolic boundaries of L8 in the 1970s, or the threats posed by racialized policing. Experiences of institutional forms of racism have persisted: ‘Policing hasn’t changed. I still see kids today getting harassed in the same way that I was when I was 10’ (50–59, male, Black mixed heritage). Deaths in police custody, including that of Mzee Mohammed Daley in Liverpool in July 2016 (Hirsch 2016), add sustenance to these experiences and have been central to recent
Black Lives Matter protests in the city (Bassey 2020; Denny 2020). Historical experiences and localised conflict with areas bordering their L8, impacted on some residents’ desire for knowledge of a wider Black history and belonging. This was rooted in neighbourhood:

[… ] when you start looking at Park Road, their roads and their streets there’s a whole other heap of history to learn about that I wouldn’t have known about growing up ‘cause I was about the Black history […] we didn’t discuss the history of the Dingle, that had no relevance to us. We were hungry for Black knowledge, a Black sense of belonging (40–49, female, Black mixed heritage)

Residents’ activism can be most clearly seen through the Granby4streets project, an inspiring example of what Ward (1976) would call ‘dweller control’. Here, residents turned abandoned streets and uninhabitable houses into affordable homes based on need. The project (that won the Turner Prize in 2015) is a huge source of pride and dignity to residents (Granby 4 Streets CLT 2019).

**New diversities**

While ‘coming-togetherness’ has been a very real strategy for negotiating and managing a sustained history of inequality of opportunity, L8 continues to face challenges. Some residents voiced concerns around competition for decent and affordable housing as parts of the neighbourhood become gentrified (the ‘Georgian Quarter’). Others identified concerns of social and cultural changes arising through recent (im)migrant settlement and growth, and of potential ethnic tensions between ‘established’ and ‘new’ Eastern European communities.

While the context of this locale is unique, many of the findings will resonate with other highly ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. Wessendorf’s (2020, 217) research on Eastern European migrants in Newham noted concerns of ‘territorial take over, not speaking English, and not wanting to mix’ and relate to a history of exclusion, racism and precariousness. Yet, empathetic attitudes were also expressed towards new migrants based upon their adverse experiences in a post-Brexit Britain. Erel’s (2011) research demonstrates how ethnic minorities were simultaneously positioned as both ‘hosts’ and targets of racism by new migrants in Peterborough. James’s (2015) work on youth localities in east London establishes fluid inter-sections of ‘race’, class and gender that reflect paradoxical practices where ‘exclusion lived together with collaboration and where insecurity existed alongside sociability’ (James 2015, 163).

The myriad of distinct ethnic identities (Black, White British and Irish, West African, Chinese, Somalian, mixed-race) that co-exist with a shared identity with L8 has perhaps helped to alleviate some of these divisions and conflicts. Some residents reflected positively on the changing ethnic diversity of neighbourhood, and the mixedness of their everyday interactions. The sense of shared history was hugely influential, with residents’ perspectives on migration and settlement often situated in longer historical processes in which the majority of L8’s communities will continue to accept and absorb ‘new’ and diverse communities, as it always has done:

My Dad’s Mum used to always go on about Somalis are coming over here and getting jobs and stuff like that, but I’m like, yes, but you had children to an African man who probably
‘come over’ and ‘got that house’ and stuff like that […]! There may be some of those under-tones with some of the older generation, but I think for the younger generation it’s more about living in harmony, just living your life. Until it comes to the Eastern Europeans […] that’s where there might be a bit of prejudice, but I’d like to think that it’s not that widespread just because of the area that it is (20–29, male, Black mixed heritage)

[…] my direct neighbour is a new Muslim family and they seem very nice, they’ve baked for us sometimes and if they have a party, they send a plate in for us; very, very nice. There is an Afghan couple further down, he’s a taxi driver. He’ll give me a lift wherever I’m going and I’ll let him put the car on my drive if he needs to. We all help each other (50–59, male, Black mixed heritage)

Conclusions

This paper has explored how, and in what ways, distinct community and neighbourhood characteristics can shape positive ethnic residential concentration. We began by critiquing the dominant UK policy narrative that segregation is inherently and consistently negative (see HM Government 2018) and reflecting on Peach’s (1996) arguments for ‘good’ segregation. Adopting a case-study approach, we explored a multi-ethnic inner-city neighbourhood in south Liverpool with a long history of discriminatory and exclusionary policies in housing and employment. Systemic class and racial discrimination have impacted on the marginalisation and racialisation of L8 residents, and have led to the consolidation of ethnic concentration, particularly of those dependent on social housing. Such processes have occurred from a position of disadvantage.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with residents of L8, we find that shared experiences of disadvantage, discrimination, racism and exclusion have acted to create and reinforce resilient social bonds within the neighbourhood. Utilising formal and informal social and support networks and drawing on a proud history of community struggles against local injustices, residents are unified in, across, and because of place. Attachment and belonging to L8 rest on numerous overlapping processes relating to racial abuse outside the neighbourhood (including traumatic experiences of exclusion and racism following re-housing in predominantly White areas of the city). These experiences have deterred others from moving away from L8, whilst co-ethnic clustering provides a sense of safety for residents. Relatedly, persistent place-based stigma, inherited across generations, has reinforced attachment to the area through the construction and use of counter-narratives. These challenge and subvert the stigmatisation of L8, focusing instead on the positives of safety, tolerance and belonging in diversity.

A linchpin of this neighbourhood cohesion is the area’s high levels of ethnic diversity and inter-ethnic mixing that has typified L8 since even before the Windrush (Frost 2008; Costello 2001; Small 1991). In contrast to some studies suggesting that ethnic diversity can undermine intergroup relations (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002; Putnam 2007), our findings demonstrate how diversity has a distinctly positive impact on intra-neighbourhood relationships.

The small sample size makes it problematic to draw out detailed and more nuanced differences around attitudes to ethnic clustering. However, we did identify broader commonalities around issues of safety, acceptance, and the normalisation of ethnic diversity between our three groups of residents: recent settlers were attracted to the
area precisely because of its diversity; long-standing residents expressed an aversion to moving away to less diverse areas, and those who had moved away but came back cited the same reasons. A complex interplay between the negative causes of the concentration of Black and other racialised and minoritised groups – through deep-rooted racism and discrimination – and the many positive outcomes of this concentration – including neighbourhood belonging, pride, a distinct place identity, and high levels of perceived social solidarity – reveal endorsement for positive ethnic clustering in L8 by each of the three groups.

Residents’ narratives of neighbourhood pride commonly referenced the area’s long history of embracing diversity, contrasting the often difficult and painful experiences in which they are grounded. The trauma of class and racial disadvantage and discrimination can leave communities scarred (Lane et al. 2017), but it can also galvanise them into action. In L8, this has been articulated through neighbourhood self-defence over police racism (Frost and Phillips 2011; Nelson 2000), the provision of practical, often informal, knowledge around access to resources such as housing and employment (see also Bolt, Özüekren, and Phillips 2010), and the physical and emotional safety that L8’s socio-spatial boundaries offer its residents (Catney, Frost, and Vaughn 2018). This agency furnishes dignity in the face of distress, reinforcing pride and creating stronger social bonds, or what Hickman and Mai (2015) refer to as ‘from here and elsewhere’ neighbourhood narratives. This results in an inherent and positive acceptance of diversity and more open social norms. The combined experiences of disadvantage and racialized discrimination, and the rich ethnic diversity of L8, has resulted in: ‘People construct[ing] community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity’ (Cohen 1985, 118). Slater and Anderson (2012) similarly found pride and ‘protectionism’ in the ethnically diverse neighbourhood of St Paul’s in Bristol. Like in L8, neighbourhood bonds were forged through residents’ struggles against inequality, adversity and external negative stigmatisation (also see Sturgis et al.’s 2014 study of London, which shows higher perceived social cohesion in more ethnically diverse neighbourhoods). Ethnic minority concentration in L8 has not led to the ‘fragmentation’ of community purported in political-policy narratives, but instead has encouraged a protective identity of ‘belonging through difference’ that has been strengthened across generations (see also Frost and Catney 2020).

The findings presented underscore the potential contributions of local micro-level studies in disrupting hegemonic narratives around residential concentration/segregation. They highlight the importance of centring grass-roots narratives in which residents’ perspectives and personal experiences are privileged, and place specificity and uniqueness is acknowledged. Our findings do not sit straightforwardly with ‘official’ narratives that emphasise the way ethnic clustering, particularly of immigrant groups, is the result of ‘elective’ settlement and clustering. These processes have not shaped, and do not reflect, the experiences of residents in L8. Here, ‘choice’ is tempered by persistent poverty and racism. Moreover, our findings disrupt the dominant ‘segregation as negative’ (sub)conscious, demonstrating the support and conviviality offered in an ethnically heterogeneous disadvantaged neighbourhood. We present alternative narratives of positivity, despite their foundations in adverse social conditions and processes. Localised responses like those in L8 are significant because
they are symptomatic of, and speak to, wider mechanisms around power and inequality. They additionally alert us to how disadvantage and stigma are played out locally. Finally, such localised empirical data helps shed light on the hidden agency of marginalised and disempowered communities.

Our findings resonate with Walton’s (2016) study of a multi-ethnic low-income neighbourhood in the Midwestern US, with high collective efficacy despite structural disadvantage. Indeed, we find community efficacy not just despite, but because of L8’s deep-rooted structural disadvantage. Building on the suggested benefits of inter-ethnic contact (Allport 1954), we argue that ethnically diverse neighbourhoods might in some cases offer a ‘more-than-contact’ experience, where neighbourhood belonging acts as a protective shield against unjust and harrowing experiences of racial and class injustices. Yet it is important to acknowledge that whilst such experiences represent the positive agency of such communities, they cannot dismantle the destruction that wider structural processes continue to inflict on ethnically diverse less affluent neighbourhoods like L8. The celebration of ethnic diversity in L8 must be understood alongside the challenges the neighbourhood faces, including significant levels of socio-economic inequalities and racism, heighten competition for scarce resources, and gentrification.

Notes

1. Black includes those of Sub-Saharan African; African-Caribbean; Black British and Somali heritages. White includes those of English, Irish, Welsh and Eastern Europeans heritages. Arabic, those of predominantly Yemen and mixed heritage. Mixed-race/heritage includes those who identify as such with one or more of these heritage(s).
2. The Riverside ward also dissects part of Liverpool 8, but mainly encompasses its neighbouring areas.
3. Authors’ own calculation using Census Table KS201EW (Crown Copyright).
4. See Funding section.

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