# Tracing Convivality: Identifying Questions, Tensions and Tools in the Study of Living with Difference

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# Tracing Convivality: Identifying Questions, Tensions and Tools in the Study of Living with Difference

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**ABSTRACT**

The concept of 'convivality' has come to dominate studies of everyday life in diverse places. This article starts from an understanding that our concepts inescapably direct our empirical gaze in particular ways. Surveying a diverse literature, I look at the different ways in which convivality has been conceptualised, and trace tensions between these different approaches. I show how this diversity of approaches and these tensions direct attention in particular ways and so lead to a number of lingering questions or empirical blind spots in the existing literature. Drawing on my own ethnography, in the London neighbourhood of Kilburn, I illustrate some of these challenges and outline methodological approaches which might help overcome them. In particular I unpack approaches which might support a deeper engagement with questions of structure and social change, care and incommensurability, and categorisation, cognition and context, which have received insufficient attention in the literature on everyday diversity, to date. Rather than making a case for or against the utility of the concept of 'convivality', I argue that the necessary first step is to extend our empirical understanding to better cover these blind spots, and then to weigh our conceptual apparatus up accordingly.

Over the past twenty years, there has been an explosion in research examining how various forms of difference are encountered and negotiated across the terrain of everyday life. Collectively, this body of research has built up a powerful case for why diversity must be understood at an everyday level, but it has also been marked by blind spots and lingering questions.

This article departs from the understanding that theory and method are inseparable. Investigations into how differences are imagined and responded to, within everyday life, have predominantly relied on ethnographic methods, which are framed as highly inductive. Inductive approaches start not with pre-given concepts or narratives of what's important, but instead allow these to emerge from the situated practice of research within a particular context. However, a range of work on ethnographic practice has

emphasised that ethnography can never fully let go of preconceived categories (Hillyard 2010; Sliverman 2016). Ethnography inescapably requires ongoing judgment, as ethnographers decide how to frame the field, how to interpret experiences, who to talk to, what to ask, where to spend time, and how to participate (Lenhard and Samanani 2019). This process of judgment is inescapably mediated by the conceptual apparatus ethnographers hold. Ethnographic commitments to inductive inquiry must contend with the fact that we can only ever engage with the world from situated positions, that reveal certain things and occlude others (Haraway 1988; Law 2004), and through an ongoing intersubjective process, where interactions are reliant upon previously-established understandings, but can also work to transform these (White and Strohm 2014). This article, then, examines how we imagine ways of living with diversity conceptually, not with a view towards trying to reconcile conceptual shortcomings in the abstract, but in order to map new or neglected methodological approaches that might address conceptual gaps and tensions more concretely, and cast light on new facets of daily life.

To do so, I focus on a key term of art – 'convivality' – which has served both as an important theory, and as the predominant framing for studies of everyday diversity (Neal et al. 2019). I ask how this concept defines its object of study and, in doing so, directs our attention in particular ways. I identify key tensions and limitations. Rather than making a case for or against retaining the concept, however, in the sections which follow, I explore conceptual limitations within the predominant use of 'convivality' in relation to methodological approaches which might allow us to extend our understanding beyond these limits. In doing so, I suggest that the question of convivality's analytical utility is ultimately an empirical matter. In the second section, I start with what might be the thorniest question – that of the relation between everyday convivality and the systemic, structured reproduction of categorical differences, which leads to real and damaging forms of inequality. To connect these forms of analysis I draw on sociologist John Levi Martin (2009) to propose a heuristic understanding of social structure that can guide ethnographic investigations. Building on this, in the third section I draw on feminist thought and studies beyond the usual Euro-American focus of convivality research to argue for the importance of recognising forms of labour, care and incommensurability in patterning convivial relations. Following relations of caring labour highlights how convivality is often *not* spontaneous, but the product of committed efforts within particular environments, which in turn generate understandings and relations that are highly situated, and not (always) easily made commensurable with other perspectives. Looking at incommensurability raises the need to consider the different ways in whichforms of convivality might engage ideas of categorial difference, alongside local imaginaries of otherness. Thus, the fourth section looks at how local forms of convivality might be traced in relation to categories and broader imaginaries of difference, respectively.

True to the inductive methods proposed here, my own impetus to rethink how we understand convivality comes in large part from my own ethnographic work. For sixteen months, between 2014 and 2015, and intermittently thereafter, I've conducted ethnographic work in the 'superdiverse' (Vertovec 2007) London neighbourhood of Kilburn. During this time, I spent time with over two dozen community groups, spoke with or interviewed hundreds of residents, and followed the rhythm of local life –

accompanying families walking to or from school, shadowing local business owners, or hanging out living rooms, parks or at community festivals. I was interested in how Kilburn's residents made sense of the diversity around them – how difference made a difference (Bateson 1972) – and how locals found ways of connecting across meaningful differences. Long-term, dedicated fieldwork afforded opportunities to forge strong relationships, trace contending perspectives, and to experiment with methods. I conducted structured, unstructured and biographical interviews, followed community organisations as a participant-observer, and took a more active stake in local projects and organisations, helping co-produce maps, events and films. This experimentation allowed me to compare what different approaches occluded and revealed. The strongest prompt to rethink how we understand and investigate conviviality, however, came from my interlocutors themselves who would often respond to my presence or questions in unexpected and sometimes challenging ways. Finally, many of the points below are informed not only by what I observed but by what I missed – where crucial moments or dynamics may have been overlooked, prompting reflections on how to 'fail better' in ethnography (Gidley 2019).

Here, my intent is not to present in-depth ethnographic analysis, but instead to draw on ethnographic encounters as provocation, weaving these alongside theoretical and methodological considerations. In weighing up our conceptual apparatus, it helps to do so in the round – to present a relatively thorough account of both possibilities and limits. To do so, however, I am required to travel lightly, and many of the points I raise are necessarily condensed – left to readers to explore and unpack in relation to their own work and that of others.

## 1. Framing the Everyday

The turn toward studying how people understand, experience and otherwise live with diversity, across the terrain of everyday life, has sometimes been named the 'convivial turn' (Gidley 2013). In the simplest sense, conviviality simply means 'living together'. In ordinary English, the term often carries positive or even joyful connotations. The scholarly concept of 'conviviality', meanwhile, is multi-rooted. Prominent early formulations come from the campaigning priest and theologian Ivan Illich (1973); the anthropologists Joanna Overing and Allan Passes (2000), who describe indigenous Amazonian practices of cultivating harmony across differences; the anthropologist and urbanist Lisa Peattie (1998), who explores the capacity of cities and social movements to nurture feelings of joyous connection; and a range of scholarship on medieval Spain, where the term *convivencia* has been used since the 1940s to describe the coexistence of Muslims, Jews and Christians (Wolf 2009). Most recent scholarship on conviviality, however, departs most prominently from Paul Gilroy (2004, 2006) Gilroy influentially positioned conviviality as a successor concept to multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, better suited to capture the capacity to connect across differences, in a 'culturally complex, mobile and global world', shaped by 'the long-term consequences of post-colonialism, mass migration, multicultural policies and transnationalism' (Wise and Noble 2016: 424).

'Conviviality', however, has perhaps been a victim of its own success, taking on a range of inconsistent, often-contradictory meanings across different usages. Perhaps most significantly, Gilroy and his closer followers frame convivality as 'a deconstructive practice

of interaction' (Valluvan 2016: 207; c.f. Back and Sinha 2016), associated closely with the concept of 'multiculture' (c.f. Back 1996) – where relationships, identities and differences all take on a fluid quality, playing out beyond the bounds of given categories. Gilroy thus associates convivality with a 'radical openness that […] makes a nonsense of closed, fixed, and reified identity and turns attention toward the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification.' (2004: xi). Here, convivial subjects are characterised by 'a degree of differentiation […] combined with a large measure of overlapping' (Gilroy , 2006: 40). In contrast, others have resisted this characterisation, instead conceptualising convivality as 'living with *maintained* difference' (Heil 2020: 275, emphasis in original), where convivial practices produce a 'minimal consensus' (Heil 2020; Wise 2016) that enables different groups to co-exist, without enacting significant mutual transformations. Here, convivial subjects are characterised by greater differentiation, and a large measure of 'disintegration' (Meissner and Heil 2021).

Although the distinction between thick, deconstructive and thin, disintegrative conceptions of convivality is the most actively debated, further tensions abound. Linda Lapina (2016: 34–35) identifies several other 'inconsistencies' in how convivality has been characterised: as fleeting or durable; improvised or capable of being designed and cultivated; descriptive or normative; ordinary or counter-cultural. Further inconsistencies surround how convivality has been linked to conflict. While many scholars acknowledge that convivality 'does not describe the absence of racism or the triumph of tolerance' (Gilroy 2004: xi), the relationship of conflict (in general) or racism (in particular) to convivial relations is cast in shifting ways – with conviviality variously figured as encompassing (Karner and Parker 2011; Wise and Noble 2016; Heil 2020), being shored up by (Mattioli 2012 and for a historical case Nirenberg 2015), existing in parallel to (Back and Sinha 2016[1]; Berg and Nowicka 2019), or in dialectical tension with (Gilroy 2004; Back and Sinha 2016) racism and conflict. More implicitly, further differences surround how convivality is connected to subjectivity – whether conviviality is understood as a matter of practices, feelings, durable dispositions, or overt attitudes – and whether convivial orientations pertain only to racial and ethnic differences, towards a wider range of specific differences, or towards *the idea of difference*, writ-large. Some authors have attempted to subsume these different possibilities within an overarching idea – such as Gilroy's focus on the transcendence of bounded identities, or Nowicka's focus on how interdependence constitutes personhood (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014; Nowicka 2019) – but these too vary and clash.

One consequence of this jumbled situation is that a single term – convivality – gets used to refer to a range of different, potentially opposing or interacting dynamics – ranging from public behaviour to personal attitudes, or from the deconstruction to the reproduction of racial categories. In turn, it becomes harder to focus on these different dynamics, either their own right or in interaction with one-another (Samamani forthcoming). This encompassing framing also makes it harder to identify whether, in fact, particular dynamics are being overlooked. This not only blunts the analysis of particular situations but also makes it harder to understand convivial orders within any broader context. For many authors, again following Gilroy, conviviality is taken as holding 'emancipatory possibilities' (2004: 161) which are entangled with but distinguishable from prevailing orders of racialisation and inequality. When conviviality is described in terms of such a varied and sometimes opposing array of ideas, it

becomes hard to trace where this possibility lies and how exactly dynamics of conviviality relate to those of racialisation and inequality.

How, then, to proceed? Perhaps we don't yet know. If the concept of conviviality has served to obscure distinctions between dynamics and domains of life – which might reveal different understandings if approached separately or relationally – then we are faced with an empirical question. It may be that sustained attention to these dynamics and domains extend and clarify our understanding of conviviality, it may be that we find ourselves in need of a suite of alternative or complementary concepts to grasp how diversity is encountered and lived with within everyday worlds. Indeed, both possibilities may be true in particular ways. To move forward, we must first unpack some of these empirical lacunae, and explore methods for correcting these.

## 2. Tracing Structures of Difference

The most pointed critique of studies of everyday diversity have come from scholars who argue that these studies frequently neglect processes of racialisation – involving the systematic reproduction of hierarchical group differences – and gloss over existing inequalities, prejudices and tensions. This critique has been articulated most prominently by Gill Valentine (2008a). Valentine targets what she calls the 'cosmopolitan turn' in urban studies, which 'celebrates the potential for the forging of new hybrid cultures and ways of living together with difference', departing from the understanding that encounters and mixing will lead to cultural differences being 'dissolved' (2008a: 324). She criticises such studies: for taking claims to tolerance or openness at face value rather than reading them as indicative of an adherence to public norms; for not tracing how and what encounters actually transform over time and space; and for failing to trace not only how prejudices may co-exist with professed openness, but how prejudices too are tools for navigating an unequal, racialized world. The distribution and utility of prejudice, she argues, needs to be understood within a 'context of […] personal and community insecurity'. Similar critiques have been made by those who rely on the concept of conviviality. Thus, for example Les Back and Shamser Sinha (2016: 523) argue that Gilroy's formulation of conviviality highlights 'the need for broader structural forces to be brought into focus, within studies of everyday diversity' (see also Valluvan 2016; Neal et al. 2019).

In response to these challenges, Valentine (2008a; Valentine and Sadgrove 2014) calls for a focus on how attitudes vary and are shaped across different spaces, alongside a focus on biography as a frame for understanding the relationship between attitudes and action, and how both might change overtime. Meanwhile, Back and Sinha (2016; Sinha and Back 2014) call for a dialogic and collaborative approach to doing research – including supporting various means of expression, such as photography – that creates space for participants to express their experiences and understandings beyond the confines of dominant registers. While useful, I would argue that these suggestions nonetheless leave us somewhat short of being able to apprehend 'broader structural forces' within ethnography, in a way which would fully allow us to explore the impact and potential of conviviality against structures of racialisation and inequality.

Studies of conviviality, in other words, need a way of bringing both structural and counter-structural forces into focus, without reifying either. I would suggest this can be done by following sociologist John Levi Martin (2009). Martin proposes a simple

understanding of social structure that bypasses the agency-structure dichotomy which emerges in much of social science, by starting from an understanding of structure simply as 'as regular patterns of interaction' (7). This minimal definition focuses on regularity – on repetition across time – and action, but takes the other elements commonly associated with structure, such as ability to direct action, and treats them as contingent. From this perspective, how patterns of interaction come to be recognisable by others as such, how they come to be taken up, and how they come to mediate the distribution of particular advantages or disadvantages in a given context, are all empirical questions. Whether or not we find this account of structure theoretically satisfying, I argue that it provides a useful heuristic for tracing how different patterns of convivality gain the ability to challenge other configurations of difference. Concretely, this means tracing how convivality is manifest not simply in the attitudes our interlocutors express but also, as Valluvan (2016) notes, in durable dispositions that shape interaction. It also means tracing how these dispositions extend across time, space and relations, as they are learnt, garner recognition, and come to shape further relations in turn.

## 2.1. Biographical Frames

This tracing can unfold along a number of dimensions. The first, following Valentine, is biographical – that is in terms of how convivial orientations shape changes across the life course. Within a focus on biography, there are several important perspectives. One is a focus on 'ontogeny' – that is the process of intertwined biological and social development, up to adulthood. Anthropologists have highlighted how some of our most fundamental assumptions about what the world is, and how we might be able to relate to others, are cultivated across the processes by which our brains and bodies grow through interaction with a particular cultural world (Toren 2009, 2012). In Kilburn, the 'naturalization' of relations across difference was closely associated with spaces like schools, nurseries, and youth clubs – and parents who had themselves faced racism and inter-group conflicts, would often comment on the different perspectives they saw their children acquiring. The cultivation or transformation of naturalised understandings is an ongoing process, but childhood and adolescence are often particularly fertile ground for enabling such understandings to take root. In turn, this perspective places focus on the important differences which may exist between *ontologized* patterns of convivality, where certain differences are taken not to exist or not to matter, and more *reflexive*, self-concious stances.

Next, we might productively focus on intergenerational relations. Studies of popular opinion show patterns of generational succession in attitudes towards difference, where older members of both majority and minority groups report a greater sense of progress and positivity surrounding issues of discrimination and prejudice, while younger generations are more likely to view these same histories as ones of minimal change and enduring injustice (Ballinger 2018). Generational dynamics highlight the 'absent presence' of families (Valentine 2008b) and other key institutions of socialisation within studies of convivality, which almost always approach attitudes and dispositions within given moments, and as individually held, rather than tracing them across time or situating them within formative relationships.

Finally, a biographical focus offers greater potential to illuminate how convivial dispositions are entangled with the ongoing (re)shaping of subjecthood within unequal contexts. Often conviviality is conceived in terms of dispositions, or 'tools' (following Illich 1973), in order to resist a totalising logic of identity and instead approach subjecthood as a set of distributed potentials (Noble 2013; Back and Sinha 2016; Wise and Noble 2016; Berg and Nowicka 2019). As valuable as this anti-essentialist stance is, it also risks producing a fragmentary perspective, where a focus on convivial dispositions decontextualises the cultivation, use and potentials of convivial tools from the broader biographical and social contexts in which they take shape and must operate. An anthropologically informed understanding of subjecthood (e.g. Moore 2007) – of who people feel themselves to be – that examines how convivial dispositions inform diverse forms of selfhood, animated by particular understandings, desires and hopes, offers a way of more critically engaging with the potentials and limits of convivial 'tools'.

In my own research this lesson was driven home during a lengthy conversation with 'Wyatt' – a young man in his 20s, born to Caribbean parents, himself very much a product of London's fluid multiculture. A self-described 'renaissance man', Wyatt had honed his skills as an animator, rapper, and music producer, (having also worked as a teaching assistant) and had developed a personal artistic style that drew eclectically on global influences. He was sharply aware of the effects of racism on the lives of black Londoners – including his own – and professed little patience for anyone bearing prejudice or preaching intolerance. In short, he was clearly adept in using many of the specific convivial tools identified by Back and Sinha (2016: 530) – such as 'Fostering attentiveness and curiosity' and 'Develop[ing] an aversion to the pleasures of hating' – to act on the world around him and to shape his own sense of self. Yet, in our conversation, Wyatt also set out his own theory of innate racial difference, where people possessed incompatible genetic and spiritual natures based on the amount of melanin in their skin. Such theories helped Wyatt make sense of long histories of oppression and conflict, but also provided a way for him to parse key biographical experiences, such as past relationships with non-black girlfriends which were marked by a steady stream of disagreements, small racialized slights, and a feeling of being fetishised as a black man. They also resonated with Wyatt's experiences as a musician, where the deeply stirring feelings of making and listening to hip-hop seemed to suggest that such 'black music' tapped into an innate, vital spiritualty, which was often stripped away as this music was commercialised and altered to appeal to white audiences. On the face of it, Wyatt was deeply inconsistent – ridiculing the drawing of racial boundaries, and asserting a hybrid subjectivity in one moment, and insisting on incommensurable differences, framed in racial language, the next. These shifts, however, can be understood as mapping onto the uses and limits of convivial tools within his life – where such tools, and the dispositions they foster, allowed him to navigate the world in certain ways, but not in others, and where more categorial ideas of race re-emerged in relation to more fundamental disjunctures in understanding and affect.

## 2.2. Following Mobile Subjects

As Wyatt's story illustrates, 'regular patterns of interaction' emerge within specific relationships, sites and times, tugging on biographical trajectories and forms of

subjecthood in distinct ways. Most studies of conviviality rely predominantly on interviews and site-specific (participant-)observation. There is a greater need to incorporate carefully considered 'mobile methods' (see Merriman 2014), to explore how subjects bearing convivial dispositions are shaped by, and come to shape, distinctive contexts. In particular, as Katharine Tyler (2020) argues, there is a need to bring the conventional focus on public and semi-public settings such as street markets, schools, and community groups, into relation with other sites such as households, families and friendships, which may elicit different expressions of convivality, or cultivate counter-tendencies of prejudice or exclusion (Mogilnicka 2018). For instance, for Wyatt, the specific experience of being misrecognised within *intimate relationships* – characterised culturally by the promise of deep intersubjective connection – contributes to his persistent understanding of race as source of essential, unbridgeable difference.

### 2.3. Identifying Critical Conjunctures

Finally, there is a need to look at critical moments, such decisions in hiring, firing or promotion, attempts to rent homes or secure mortgages, the allocation of funds to community groups, encounters with police, or the streaming of children into different educational tiers, which have a disproportionate effect on life chances. While recognising that the reproduction and deleterious effects of discrimination are often diffuse, we can nonetheless follow our everyday understanding of structure as 'regular patterns of interaction' to conduct mundane and smaller-scale forms of what Stuart Hall termed 'conjunctural analysis', where we trace the (micro)historical patterns that come together to constitute particular critical moments (see Grayson and Little 2017). Wyatt, for instance, recounted struggling in his work as a teaching assistant – as he was constantly reminded he did not look or talk like a teacher. We ought to ask more robustly whether the 'fugitive' (Back and Sinha 2016) patterns of convivality add up to something capable of making meaningful material differences in the shaping of life chances.

### 2.4. Targeted Methods

The need to grasp how convivality unfolds in micro-structural ways, may seem to demand slower forms of study – forms of ethnography that grapple with change across the life course, movements across space, and thorny, often occluded interactions with key institutional figures. While slow, meticulous ethnography is certainly valuable, some of these questions can also be interrogated through other inventive approaches. For example, ontogeny might be explored by asking directed questions of figures such as teachers, and childminders. Change across the life course might be understood not only through biographical interviews, or creative tools such as photography, but additionally through work that takes families or networks of relations, rather than individuals, as the unit of study. Likewise, changes across space might be accessed not only through participant observation, but through approaches such as participatory mapping and participant diary-keeping. Rather than seeing any of these methods as inherently revelatory, however, the choice of methods needs to relate closely to how we want to trace the unfolding of convivial patterns.

## 3. Labour, Care, Incommensurability

The tracing of convivality is mostly focused on minority-world contexts, where growing diversity has often been a source of national anxiety. Yet questions of coexistence have been exploredby scholars working across a much wider range of contexts, using different analytical languages. Many such cases highlight coexistence as dependent on often-gendered everyday labours. To take just two examples, in Karachi, Laura Ring (2006) traces forms of 'everyday peace' in a high-rise apartment, attributing these to women's relentless efforts to maintain neighbourly relations of interdependency and care, to manage men's emotions, and to domesticate and re-narrate the implications of national events in the midst of ongoing civil strife. Meanwhile, across the border in Delhi, Veena Das (2007) traces how people grapple with the afterlife of Partition and communal violence – where perpetrators of violence were sometimes friends, neighbours or acquaintances. Das argues that these legacies are often not confronted  out loud, but through what she terms a 'descent into the ordinary'. Here, ongoing relations of conversation, care and commerce both weave lives together into forms of interdependency and accommodation, and also stage silences and points of rupture, keeping alive ongoing pain and attending to the ongoing possibility of fresh betrayal, within, rather than against, a frame of everyday coexistence – as much as possible. In Kilburn too, some dynamics of convivality were spontaneous and unpredictable, but many more were evidently the work of paid community organisers and project-workers, volunteers and neighbourhood figures who thoughtfully laboured to creating settings or moments of contact and exchange, and to bridge between people who may not have otherwise interacted.

Since the 1960s, feminist thinkers have been emphasising how the forms of socially-reproductive or care labour that go into (re)making the world are often rendered invisible by an assumption that they are simply the expression of natural tendencies (Benston 1969; Vogel 1973). Approaches to convivality which emphasise spontaneity, ease and fluidity must tread carefully if they are to avoid simply reproducing a romanticised ideal of 'natural' community (Creed 2006) – one stripped of its volkish or groupist component, but still clinging to the idea that beyond the powerful organising forces of the state and market, and beyond the weighty legacies of racism, undifferentiated or spontaneous connection will organically emerge. Conversely, such interventions should prompt us to focus our attention more closely on convivial labour and care.

### 3.1. Labour …

The importance of labour to creating and maintaining convivial relationships has been highlighted by Greg Noble (2009) and Amanda Wise (2016). Noble touches on various dimensions of convivial labour, including brokerage (facilitating participation or access), bonding (building emotional and interdependent ties), bridging (connecting those who would not normally interact, and translating between different understandings and priorities), mediation, and the (collective) creation of various local projects that bolster both belonging and wellbeing. He draws on Marcel Mauss's notion of gift relations to argue that such community-oriented labours create ties of reciprocity, which animate a process of 'mutual, collective fashioning that comes out of shared practice, out of doing something together', underwriting mutual-recognition beyond

categorical identities (62). Where Noble emphasises how relations of reciprocity and recognition unfold over time, Wise stresses how sites of ongoing encounter demand an 'improvised practice of living with and negotiating difference' (482).

## 3.2.  … and Care

Duration and improvisation come together in Annmarie Mol's definition of care as 'persistent tinkering in a world full of complex ambivalence and shifting tensions' (Mol et al. 2010: 14; see Mol 2008). 'Care' is a term often evoked in discussions of conviviality, but rarely unpacked. Mol's definition provides a useful orientation for tracing practices of care, where care emerges as a relationship of committed interdependence, whose terms and practices are not static, but which involve constant practices of attunement as people, circumstances and needs change across space and time (c.f. Samanani 2017). Proper attention to labour and care ought to do away with any offhand analytical equivalence between thick and thin forms of conviviality – between casual, untroubled interactions between strangers, and effortful, often costly or perilous commitments to cultivating and maintaining meaningful interdependency.

Methodologically, this calls for two things. The first is simply for further attention to be paid to the productive or sustaining potentials of conviviality – to trace conviviality not only in terms of attitudes or dispositions but through actions and the transformations they affect, whether large or small. The second, more radical need, is for a range of methods that attend to, and actively partake of the work of social reproduction. As I have argued in greater detail elsewhere (Lenhard and Samanani 2019), the worlds social scientists study are never stable or given entities but the product of constant, ongoing, and often contested labour that is simultaneously sustaining and transformative. The stakes, experiences and challenges surrounding such everyday labours are highly embodied and situated, not easily grasped from the outside, or through attempts to produce synchronic snapshots of things as they are – as such labour often involves a subtle working-out of possibilities as they unfold. To grasp this perspective, we need to attend to and become implicated in the active, ongoing efforts that are constantly engaged in transforming our field sites.

This lesson was brought home to me by 'Kilburn Ageing Together' (KAT), an organisation that aimed to understand local experiences of 'ageing in place', and make the neighbourhood more accessible, accordingly. One project run by KAT, dubbed 'bench to bench', involved the production of a booklet of local maps, that highlighted benches and other mobility-abetting resources such as crosswalks, cafes or freely-usable toilets, in order to allow older people to confidently embark on local walks, reconnect with their local area, and meet with others. The maps were drawn through a participatory-mapping exercise. These were then refined through numerous 'test walks' where first the project team, and then community groups, embarked on the various routes to identify amenities and test their feel.

As I learnt, however, much of the labour required lay not in the representational exercise of creating maps, but in the continual negotiation required to maintain and access the routes they depicted. These negotiations involved everything from lobbying the council to replace stolen or destroyed benches, to convincing isolated older residents to join group walks, to negotiating with daytime drinkers occupying park benches.

The understanding that mobility involved a constant negotiation was not captured by the participatory mapping, which depicted routes and amenities as static entities. Participants, too, tended to discuss walks after the fact as joyous and relatively straightforward. Volunteering for the project, however, revealed the sheer extent and highly-embodied nature of these continuous negotiations . For instance, helping push wheelchair users, gave me a much deeper sense of the vulnerability associated with everyday mobility and infirmity. Hills were exhausting and precarious. Sometimes simply asking people to make space could provoke anger. And when confronted, one had little capacity to respond, except deferentially. How this labour of negotiation was distributed had very real consequences for who was able to take part in the walks, and so who could access their convivial possibilities.

The call to take part in everyday labour and care incorporates but goes beyond recent calls for 'convivial methods' – that is methods which generate everyday togetherness. Such calls have centred around methods that prioritise the co-production of knowledge (Berg and Nowicka 2019). These approaches privilege producing forms of *expression*, such as stories, maps, or videos. In contrast, what I am advocating here are methods where researchers (sensitively) participate in the existing world-sustaining-and-transforming *efforts and contestations* of interlocutors within the field – whether this is through activism, volunteering, or providing forms of care.

My suggestion is not that all researchers must actively engage in labour and care, but that doing so offers an important, highly-situated perspective, against which other forms of knowledge must be contextualised. Accounts which depict convivial encounters and orientations as joyous, carefree, or automatic, simply because they are presented that way, risk contributing to the erasure and devaluation of socially reproductive labour often required to make such feelings and orientations possible. Labour and care cannot fully be accounted for through methods that rely on generalizing representations (Middleton and Samanani 2021) or forms of immersion within a site that do not partake of reproductive and transformative labours (Lenhard and Samanani 2019). At the least, these limits require acknowledgement.

### 3.3. Incommensurability

Attention to relations of care should also attune us to dynamics of incommensurability. Gilroy (2004) argues stringently against 'the sham wisdom of incommensurable cultural difference, contending civilisations, opposed religions, and untranslatable customs' (157). For Gilroy, ideas of incommensurable difference reflect the enduring legacy of regimes of racial classification, which prevent people from recognising that 'human beings are ordinarily far more alike than they are unalike' (4; and see especially Gilroy 2000). Meanwhile, for those who understand conviviality as grounded in 'minimal consensus', conviviality by definition does not involve *negotiating* incommensurable differences – whether or not these are thought to exist. Both approaches resist engaging with incommensurability not simply as a discursive construction, but as a facet of everyday existence. Feminist philosophical thinking on care has shown how situated relations of care generate particular forms of knowledge, reason and value that cannot be divorced from the context of particular lives and relations. As Joan Tronto (1993) and others (e.g. Sevenhuijsen 1998) emphasise, this makes incommensurability a part of everyday

relations, where things are necessarily apprehended in different ways from different situated perspectives, and where there is no universal 'god's eye' view (Haraway 1988) from which everything can be rendered equally comprehensible at once. The distinct forms of knowledge and experience that emerge from different experiences, and which accrue through efforts to cultivate particular worlds, may sometimes map onto bounded groups and certainly involve the workings of power, which shape how boundaries are drawn, and what sorts of worlds can be built. Ultimately, however this is a form of incommensurability rooted in the existential fact of human difference, and routinely navigated within everyday interactions. It cannot be reduced to power, or bracketed aside.

As Gidley (2013, 2019) has insisted, '"super-diverse" contexts defined by the proximity of incorrigible world views generate infinite incommensurate perspectives that inevitably elude capture by social scientists' (2019: 124). Gidley calls for methods which 'hold open … a safe space in which competing and incommensurable claims to truth can be spoken, and where differences can be worked through' (133) while also acknowledging that these efforts will remain inescapably partial, intertwined with failure. It's worth recognising, however, that not all differences will be articulable or negotiable in the same spaces. Gidley seems to recognise this in also calling for and illustrating 'collaborative modes of inquiry, working in teams that are multilingual, that are able to pursue multiple research strategies in sync.' (2013: 369). In addition to collaboration, it's useful for researchers to examine how they might 'hold space' for divergent and even incommensurable views *individually* – for instance through attending to multiple modalities of 'partial-connection' (Strathern 2004), such as friendship, co-residence, proximity, and conflict, in order to trace the continuities and breaks between different perspectives, networks, and modes of being, within the same setting. Such approaches hold the promise of getting at more powerful and transformative patterns of co-existence, which are defined not (only) by the absence of incommensurability, but by the more challenging work of holding relations together across deep and enduring differences – and which are not necessarily rendered 'thin' by these challenges.

## 4. Categories, Cognition and Context

Difference is not only encountered face to face, but symbolically. Communication relies on the use of abstract categories, which often shape everyday judgements. Yet writing on convivality is equivocal about how everyday relations relate to categorical notions of difference. Gilroy (2004: xi) frames convivality as a pattern which resists or transcends notions of 'reified identity'. Some scholars take up this focus, tracing convivality in terms of the suspension, blurring or reworking of categorical differences. Others present convivality more in terms of positive interactions or attitudes *across* relatively stable categorical differences. Beyond these approaches, however, there is a need to be more fine-grained in analysing how everyday interactions and relations relate to categories of difference.

### 4.1. Dynamics of Categorization

There are many ways of categorising difference. And there are many different ways in which categories of difference get framed within interaction. For instance, challenging

or connecting across differences could entail crossing, splitting, encompassing, reworking/transforming, blurring, transcending, suspending, or bypassing categories – to name just a few possibilites. For example 'crossing' involves a recognition that participants are connecting across meaningful differences, 'suspending' involves recognising that participants are marked by differences that matter in other contexts but not here, and 'bypassing' involves the situated irrelevance and unintelligibility of categories of difference altogether.

Representations matter because they both reflect existing social structures ('regular patterns of interaction') but also facilitate the ability to reflect on and transform such structures. Tracing the different ways in which representations are engaged within convivial encounters and orientations enables us to better contextualise how expressions of conviviality may operate to maintain or transform given structures. When I started my research in Kilburn, I was anxious about how my presence as a visible (and audible) minority would impact what people said about how they understood and related to forms of difference. To my surprise, I found that many white-British residents were happy to share anxieties around migration and diversification. These anxieties were frequently voiced through forms of suspension or bypassing, where people would either explicitly make an exception ('obviously, I don't mean you') or simply leave my own ostensible difference unremarked, while speaking in ways which implied I would share their perspective ('*you* know what I mean'). In some instances, I got the sense that I was being told these views precisely *because of* my marked difference – because the open, friendly relationships I shared with my interlocutors would vindicate their views, as something other than straightforwardly prejudiced. Enacting convivial openness allowed people to reinterpret their ambivalent but enduring investments in dominant hierarchies of belonging – helping justify and sustain such investments.

In other instances, different dynamics unfolded. For instance, with a significant Somali population in the area, I noticed that many locals deployed the categories 'Somali' and 'Black' in shifting ways. When indexing local antagonisms, such as struggles over charity funding or the allocation of social housing – or indeed, national debates, for instance over the admission of asylum seekers – these categories were often used to suggest distinct groups with opposing interests. In other instances, however, such as in discussions of forms of disadvantage and stigma which characterised the neighbourhood, 'black' was used as an encompassing category – sometimes even extended to all ethnic minorities or to all marginalised residents regardless of ethnicity. These contested acts of categorisation oriented people toward one another in particular ways, shaping their interactions.

Cultures categorise differences in different ways – ranging from the more generic figure of the 'migrant' to the specific associations attached to particular ethnic groups, generations, classes, legal statuses and so on. Convivial relations play out in codified worlds, implicitly or explicitly offering alternative maps for navigating such worlds than those offered by dominant categorizations. Attending to how convivial orientations are situated within existing landscapes of meaning reveals a much livelier situation, where the potential for convivial orientations to include certain groups and to bridge, deconstruct or otherwise act on certain frames of difference, is never uniform and always a product of various forms of ongoing contestation. The interplay of different categories serves as a useful guide for tracing the contours of such contestations.

## 4.2. Affect and Cognition

Being more precise about the framing and interplay of categories also prompts and enables us to be more precise about those aspects of convivial relations that seem to bypass representational registers. Although a range of work has emphasised the sensory, affective and often-unconscious nature of convivial orientations (e.g. Amin 2012; Back 2009; Back and Sinha 2016), these accounts tend to emphasise matters of cognition without significantly engaging with psychological research. For instance, Valentine (2008) has influentially challenged Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis for suggesting that contact on its own may serve to reduce prejudice, within complex social contexts, shaped by power and inequality. Yet Valentine wholly neglects the decades of research building on and nuancing Allport – which has precisely emphasised the importance of various contextual factors, surrounding the dynamics, duration and setting of contact, and the charcteristics of interlocutors (see Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Hewstone and Swart 2011 for overviews). One crucial finding from such research is that the ability for contact to transform broader attitude relies on there being an interface between moments of contact and symbolic categories – where others are also seen as representative of broader groups. When this interface is absent, it becomes possible for positive effects of encounters to emerge in parallel to more symbolic understandings. Findings such as this highlight the need to attend to the interplay of symbolic and non-representational understandings, rather than simply embracing or dismissing either as the basis for transformation. While experimental studies are reductive by definition, this limit should provide a prompt for cross-disciplinary dialogue rather than dismissal – particularly when our accounts of convivality themselves trade implicitly on questions of cognition.

## 4.3. Tracing Context and Scope

Attending to the interface between particular convivial relations and the wider categories that colour and shape the world also directs us to a more general need to place convivality in context. Context, in this regard not only includes detail of national and local histories, political economy, and dominant discourses – which are often included – but also specific details of how our interlocutors are situated within these formations. The 'methodological neighbourhoodsism' (Berg et al. 2019) of many studies is often accompanied by the implication that those within the study represent the area and common patterns of relations within it. I learnt the danger of this assumption when, during my fieldwork, I was able to accompany a group of 'community organisers', employed by a local charity, and funded under the auspices of 'The Big Society' (see Fisher and Dimberg 2016), in order to generate local community initiatives. Going door-to-door with the organisers, talking to a wide (and reasonably 'random') range of locals impressed on me that that for most people – and in contrast with those more active in community groups – interactions with unfamiliar others in public or semi-public contexts were few and far between. For many such residents, feelings of convivial indifference to difference were mapped onto these narrow geographies of encounter, while they also relied on categorical, often stereotyped notions of particular groups and places to characterise those places and groups which fell outside such routines.

This suggestion, to trace the *scope* of convivial relations, is not intended to smuggle a fetishised notion of representativeness into qualitative research. Rather, it is to help us better recognise the nature and extent of convivial patterns, and how they are supported, embedded or extended. It is one thing, for instance, to note that a particular public space or community organisation seems to foster convivial relations, and another to recognise that these resources may nonetheless not be widely used or accessible – directing our attention to how engagement is motivated, enabled or constricted. At the same time, such an approach – coupled with the recommendation above to trace conviviality from different angles, across 'partial connections' – helps resist research becoming tautological. Those with strong convivial dispositions may be more likely than others to agree to participate in research – perhaps especially in scenarios where research involves participation in public groups, whether a local running group, or a workshop organised by researchers. More engaged participants may also be more forthcoming, providing seemingly 'richer' accounts, likely to be privileged in analysis. To avoid the trap of equating conviviality with the capacity to engage with social scientists, researchers must engage in the hard work of getting to know people within the context of their own daily worlds, including the forms of care and labour, closure and incommensurability, and movements across the life course and across different contexts, which make up such worlds. Placing convivial encounters, dispositions or relations in context means returning to our definition of structure as 'regular patterns of relations', themselves subject to higher orders of patterning (Bateson 1972), and locating our ethnographic data within such convivial patterns, and against contending patterns.

## 5. Conclusion

The varied and sometimes contradictory range of meanings associated with the concept of 'conviviality' makes it challenging for researchers to use this term to orient themselves in the field. Rather than offering an overall assessment of the utility of this idea, however, I have argued that we can gain a better appreciation for what the concept can and cannot encompass and illuminate, and how it might relate to other analytic concepts, by deepening our empirical knowledge through deliberate attention to questions that current framings of 'conviviality' sometimes obscure. Specifically, this article has looked at: questions surrounding the structural durability and transformative potential of convivial relations, through lenses of biography, space/time and critical conjectures for the reproduction of (in)equality; the labour and care that goes into making up everyday worlds, and the capacity of such labour to generate everyday forms of incommensurability; and the ways in which categories are used to frame and navigate everyday relations, and how everyday relations might fit within broader contexts shaped by categorical inequalities. For each of these questions, I have operated on the understanding that our conceptual apparatus forms an inescapable part of our methodological toolkit. As such, the attempts to highlight outstanding conceptual questions/challenges and the more-concrete methodological suggestions raised throughout out this article should be seen as of a kind – collectively involving proposals for orienting our attention in studying everyday relations across forms of difference. Rather than clarifying our notions of conviviality through abstract conceptual wrangling, uniting thinking and method in this way can attune us more sensitively to the everyday terrain on which convivial relations continue to hold a fugitive hope.

## Note

1. Specifically, Back and Sinha (2016: 521) 'argue for "a way of seeing" that is attentive to forms of division and racism alongside and sometimes within multicultural convivialities', placing them within both the first and third approaches here.

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