Tomei (2003) links the emergence of the ‘diversity’ approach with social movements of 1970s and 80s that involved (amongst others) women, indigenous and tribal peoples, lesbians and gay men. These movements are associated with a rhetoric that acknowledges and celebrates – rather than suppresses or contains – a wide spectrum of differences. Although the rhetoric of ‘valuing’ diversity is perpetuated in contemporary accounts of diversity in relation to employment, it has now largely been displaced by ‘managing’ diversity (Sinclair 2000). ‘Managing diversity’ was originally promoted as an alternative approach to ‘equal opportunities’ on the grounds that it represented a ‘positive’ view of differences amongst people – as assets to be managed rather than as sources of disadvantage and discrimination (Maxwell et al 2001). This managerial focus means that, despite its radical roots, managing diversity is now understood as politically more conservative than equal opportunities, through the promulgation of the ‘business case’, in which differences amongst people are deemed significant in so far as they can be ‘harnessed’ in the interests of the organisation (Sinclair 2000; Kamp and Hagedorn Rasmussen 2004).

The origins of many UK voluntary (non-profit) organisations also lie in these social movements, with a history of organising for and representing the interests of people with diverse interests and of pressing for anti-discriminatory legislation. It is claimed that the voluntary sector has ‘distinctive value’, involving marking out a space distinct from the market, state or family (McDonald and Warburton 2003), which can encompass a campaigning, ‘values-driven’ identity, and from where to contribute ‘to the vitality and health of democratic societies’ (Smith 2005: 463). The ‘business case’, that represents managing
diversity as an instrument to achieve some other organisational end, therefore seems inappropriate where the organisation’s ‘business’ is itself equality and social justice. However it is also claimed that voluntary organisations are increasingly acting as contractors to the state and as providers of professionally managed services, and that this threatens their independence and their values base. The requirement that these organisations should be run ‘like businesses’ implies a dilution of their campaigning identity. The force of social justice arguments may therefore recede, requiring voluntary organisations to produce their own versions of the ‘business case’. These tensions – between a campaigning and a ‘business-like’ organisational identity – parallel those posed between equal opportunities and managing diversity advocated as desirable ends in themselves, or as assisting organisational goals. They make the sector a particularly interesting place from where to explore contested understandings and interpretations of diversity and equality policy and practice.

This paper draws on the preliminary (issues mapping stage) of research into equality and diversity policy and practice in the UK voluntary sector. It applies concepts from within a broadly intersectional paradigm to explore which categories are used to mark difference and how these categories are constructed in relation to the organisational mission and ethos, and in relation to the interests of a range of stakeholders. It examines the effects of these discursive practices in relation to the idea of diversity and equality conceived on the one hand as a managerial project, and on the other as an emancipatory project.

Managing diversity – origins and critique

‘Diversity’ was used in social movements to assert the presence and significance of a multiplicity of differences outside the traditional axes of race and gender. Proponents of managing diversity differentiated their approach from that of equal opportunities on the grounds that the latter was too much focused on the treatment of groups and collectives rather than of individuals, and too narrowly concerned with differences covered by anti-discrimination legislation. Managing diversity discourses have appropriated the idea of diversity as multiple differences, leading to the proliferation of lists of ever more categories of difference by which organizational members may be distinguished (Johns, 2004). Arguably
this extension is more inclusive (involving more people) but may also have the effect of diluting policies designed to counteract discrimination against the most disadvantaged, since not all markers of difference have the same marginalising and exclusionary effects (Law and Harrison, 2001; Wrench, 2005). Critics argue that the inclusion of so many categories may obscure social inequalities (since not all markers of difference have the same marginalising and exclusionary effects) and downplay the impact of structural and institutional factors that perpetuate inequalities, thereby diluting policies designed to counteract discrimination against the most disadvantaged (Wrench, 2005, Tomei, 2003 Law and Harrison, 2001). This dilution, and the emphasis given to the ‘business case’, involves a deliberate distancing of diversity initiatives from the ‘political’ associations of equal opportunities and positive action. However, as Sinclair (2000) points out, the act of coupling ‘diversity’ with ‘management’ itself involves reconstituting difference within a particular political regime in which structural and systemic processes of exclusion are largely denied.

The proponents of managing diversity contrast it with equal opportunities in order to promote it; the critics of managing diversity contrast it with equal opportunities on the basis of its privileging business arguments at the expense of moral arguments involving human rights and social justice. Yet in practice this seems a false dichotomy in that the words diversity and equality are often placed side by side, and as Kamp and Hagedorn Rasmussen (2004) argue, the appeal of managing diversity lies in its depiction of a win-win situation in which the two perspectives (equality and business success) are simultaneously achieved. There is however a lack of evidence to support the claim that diversity contributes to organisational success (Dick and Cassell, 2002), and although the rhetoric of managing diversity is widely applied, its operational meaning is very unclear.

Central to the discourses of managing diversity and equal opportunities is the marking of difference. From an equal opportunities perspective differences are significant in so far as they represent points of discrimination and oppression; from a managing diversity perspective ‘diversity’ encompasses a much wider range of characteristics that includes categories associated with oppression such as race and gender, but is not confined to these. And it is not the fact of discrimination that forms the basis from which to address particular differences – instead it is claimed all differences should be understood in positive terms as representing opportunities for added value to the organisation through their effective ‘management’. But although the rhetoric of diversity is associated with the idea of an almost infinite range of possibilities of being ‘different’, in practice diversity is marked through a set of socio-demographic categories, largely restricted to gender, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, disability, sexuality and age. It is often said that managing diversity involves the ‘harnessing’ of differences. This is an interesting metaphor because it suggests bringing under control natural and untamed phenomena. However as Jones (2004) points out, these categories are not ‘natural’, and as Woodward and Winter (2006) argue, the managing diversity approach diverts attention from how these differences are constructed, concentrating instead on their management. The deconstructing and denaturalising of difference is a central theme in many critiques of managing diversity – this paper considers the contribution of an intersectional approach to such deconstruction.

**An intersectional lens**

Dietz (2003) identifies a strand of feminist thinking – ‘diversity feminism’ – that emphasises differences, pluralities and heterogeneity and in which the subject ‘woman’ is understood as inherently multiple. She associates this strand with a political project to invoke subjugated
and marginalised others and to enable the recognition and articulation of previously unacknowledged or dismissed identities – the same project that drove the social movements of the 70s and 80s. According to McCall (2005: 1771) it is feminist academics who have been largely responsible for the emergence of intersectionality as a paradigm for exploring and conceptualising ‘multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formation’. Amongst the ideas embraced by the paradigm is *anti-essentialism* – the rejection of the idea that all those contained within a particular category or marker of identity share common characteristics that are immutable and inseparable from their category membership. The approach is also broadly *social constructionist* in that subject positions do not reflect naturally occurring entities, but are formed by discursive practices (Bottero and Irwin, 2003). The meanings of such categories are not fixed but are determined by these discursive practices, involving considering of who uses them, how and in what context (Anthias 2002). Changes in the meanings of specific markers reflect their function within different discursive practices, where the use of markers such as gender and race is not neutral but reflects and represents power struggles and power relations (Brah, 1996), so that identities are ‘multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions’ (Hall 1996, p. 4). Markers of difference serve to indicate sites of oppression, but because they are constructed in relation to each other (Ward, 2004; Prins, 2006), it is argued that ‘arithmetical’ approaches to the study of oppression – counting, multiplying or adding ‘oppressions’ – should be avoided. Understanding oppression should be based instead on consideration of how different facets and sites of oppression interlock and articulate with each other to construct experience and subjectivity. Furthermore disadvantage should be understood as *relative* and *contextual* – there are situations where women oppress other women, or oppress men – and there are power differences amongst all ‘oppressed’ categories (Ward, 2004).

Intersectional analysis involves identifying, challenging and disrupting the production and perpetuation of *binary oppositions* that discursively construct the marginalised and excluded ‘other’. The construction and marking of *differences*, such as race, gender and class simultaneously involves constructing *sameness*, and, according to Özbilgin and Woodward (2004), it is always those who constitute the ‘same’ that are accorded more power and status. Brah and Phoenix (2004) claim that inherent to the feminist analysis of intersecting categories of difference is the decentring and deconstruction of the ‘normative subject’, and that social movements were instrumental to this process: ‘decentring scaled new heights fuelled by political energies generated by social movements’ (Brah and Phoenix 2004:78). However Anthias (2002) argues that increased recognition of the fragmentation, variations and diversities amongst the subjects and groups identified with demands for equal rights has had the effect of making the idea of equality appear ‘old fashioned’. Prasad and Prasad (2002) question the relevance of universal rights and freedoms to women of different ethnic and cultural identities, raising the issue of how to reconcile the universalism of equality and social justice with the recognition of diversity within local and particular contexts. Intersectional thinking therefore, provides a challenge both to managerialist notions of diversity as a set of differences to be controlled and harnessed, and to conceptualisations of equal opportunities based on the idea of immutable and universally applicable human rights.

In this light we pose the following questions, which we explore in this paper through analysing the discursive practices of actors from within the voluntary sector. Firstly, which markers are used to construct difference and why? (Given that these markers do not represent naturally occurring entities but are discursive constructions that reflect power struggles and power relations). Secondly, how are they used, who by and what are the effects of this usage?
Bearing in mind that ‘sameness’ is always constructed together with difference and it is the ‘same’ that is generally accorded greater power and status.

The research study

We discuss these questions by drawing on interviews carried out as part of the preliminary (issues mapping) stage of a study of equality and diversity policy and practice within the UK voluntary sector. Interviewees included diversity specialists, managers (including chief executives) and project workers from a range of organisations, including infrastructure organisations. The research seeks to uncover how ‘diverse’ identities are constructed in relation to organisational goals and mission, and in relation to a range of stakeholders – not only paid employees, but organisational clients, members, volunteers, trustees and funders. Amongst the issues that were explored in the interviews was the importance attributed to the idea that the client group should be represented amongst the organisations’ employees, the organisational benefits attached to the idea of representation, whether there was a shared model of equal opportunities practice held amongst organisations in the field, and the perceived effectiveness of equality policies and practices in achieving the desired diversity within the organisation.

Based on the preliminary analysis of the transcripts of seven interviews, the extracts selected here have been chosen to illustrate the issues around which diversity and equality appear problematic or contested, or where seemingly contradictory positions were adopted by the same interviewee. We consider first how equality and diversity issues are represented in relation to the interests of two sets of stakeholders – employees and clients.

Diversity and equality – serving whose interests?
In the following extract a project manager from within an organisation working for the rehabilitation of ex-offenders describes the effects of a shared identity between client and worker on the service that the organisation provides:

‘I think what’s positive about [organisation] is that kind of in terms of employment opportunities [...] your offending background does not bar you from a job as a project worker or for any other position [...] sharing an experience with this person [...] again that may enable them to support their client better so yes support their client in understanding their experience which I think is really, really insightful you know I think that there’s a lot to be said in that – that person can kind of [...] be in the same position [...] going to prison and come out and have a job and it makes kind of like a role model, standard to our clients and also in terms of how you respect your own client because you’re working a lot with colleagues and they have offending backgrounds so I think [...] eradicates the stereotype really [...] we all have stereotypes but it really does challenge them I think an organisation like [organisation] does challenge the stereotype – and offenders come in all shapes and sizes!’

This extract reflects something fairly specific to voluntary organisations – the idea that their should be a ‘fit’ involving the organisation’s mission, its clientele and the composition of its workforce, and that an intrinsic part of an organisation’s contribution to combating the disadvantage experienced by a stigmatised and marginalised group is to employ members of that group. The positive effects identified here include the impact of shared experience on the support that ex-offenders give their clients, their acting as a role model for clients, and the challenging of their co-workers’ stereotypes. It thus combines both similarity (assuming ‘like’ experience with clients) and difference (‘offenders come in all shapes and sizes’), highlighting the multiplicity of ways of performing the identity of ‘ex-offender’. From within the same
organisation a senior manager explained how he saw equality and diversity issues in relation to what he described as an increasingly ‘corporate’ identity:

‘You’ve got [...] these workers’ [Equalities] groups they’re visible, often I think that what we forget is that we can sometimes say it’s all down to service delivery that’s all that means – what happens down there but big organisations do have to have certain levels of activity in the area base, or in the national base – they’re more than just symbolic because they do give some focus, and some profile and give some meaning to the work because otherwise it just becomes extremely marginalised, because it just becomes invisible to the organisation, it’s giving it some visibility and profile. I think that’s absolutely essential’

His arguments here reflect the danger that equality and diversity issues may easily become marginalised, and on these grounds he supports employees’ involvement in nationally-based organisational Equalities groups, which he claims have more than a ‘symbolic’ purpose. Yet towards the end of the interview, when asked what challenges he associated with equality and diversity policy and practice, he identified these same Equalities groups as problematic. In this account he presents the interests of the staff identified as Equality group members as running counter to those of their clients (tenants), invoking the interests of another set of stakeholders – those who fund their services:

‘Juggling staff and tenants – it’s always a hard one to juggle because it’s dangerous I think with staff, because sometimes staff can be an end to themselves as opposed to – staff are there to provide a service [...] I think we sometimes forget that when we become too inward looking and that’s not to say that doesn’t have to happen and sometimes that dynamic has to be there just to work through but that can cause pressure points [...] for instance, a national [Equalities] group where we’re taking people away from their work [...] up to Manchester or wherever for a meeting – they may be talking about aspects of their work which may not necessarily be sort of particularly sort of relevant to what they’re paid to do, or what they’re funded to do... [Local authority] give us two million pound grant to deliver a service in Essex, not to shape national policy up in Manchester!’

In contrast to the project manager’s account, this interviewee constructs the interests of staff, clients and funders in opposition, thus requiring a management process of ‘juggling’ to accommodate their competing requirements.

*Equal opportunities or managing diversity?*
The idea that there is a contested terrain between ‘managing diversity’ and ‘equal opportunities’ is also found within the sector, with two conflicting positions apparent in the following extracts. The first interviewee prioritises ‘equality’ over ‘diversity’, associating the former with the ethos and mission of the organisation to address disadvantage and discrimination:

‘I think there seems a real shift away from talking about equality to talking about diversity [...] and actually the two things are very very different, not that they’re not always related but – I just think that it’s very easy for organizations to – just focus on OK you know we must give people things like childcare and you know how we can deal with those things in workplace and quite often becomes very much focused on that and we forget about discrimination, disadvantage – that you know many people will face for one reason or another. So yes I think we clearly make that distinction and that’s why we have an equality and diversity policy rather than a diversity policy [...] I guess it kind of goes right back to the issue that you were talking about, about the ethos of the whole organisation that you know it would be very much be kind of tied into our whole agenda on crime protection about removing barriers for people in terms of employment with the organisation the work that we do with other organisations as well is very much kind of trying to remove those barriers of discrimination and disadvantage. For example the disproportionate effect of the criminal justice system on minority ethnic people…’

(Diversity manager, voluntary agency)

The next interviewee takes the reverse position, privileging ‘diversity’ over ‘equality’. He applies the familiar rhetoric of managing diversity as ‘positive’, associating this with a process of active management that constantly seeks out opportunities and advantages for the benefit of the organisation. His approach is in line with descriptions of how the ‘management tool’ of managing diversity is capable of ‘seamless integration’ into the strategic narratives of organisation (Jones 2004; Woodward and Winter 2006; Wrench 2005). The ‘business case’ is made here through the idea that employing people of different ethnicities is a means to ‘break into’ their communities:

‘I see equal opportunities as a baseline that you need to make sure that we are not creating unequal barriers to people you have to – my own view of managing diversity is that it is [...] a positive thing, it is about building on the strengths that diversity bring to you. [...] I’ve heard a few people talking about managing diversity which seems to close the gap between equal opps and managing diversity but to me, I mean I see things about diversity as about using – you know if we have people from minority ethnic communities who are working for us already who can provide us with an insight in how we might be able to break in to
other communities, that’s what I call managing diversity, actually building on what people bring to the table and not just saying that’s right we employ black people, that’s fine – it’s hang on a second we employ black people that must give us an advantage somewhere what is that advantage?’ (Chief executive, voluntary agency)

These accounts mirror each other, in that both place their less preferred approach in the background, representing it as the ‘baseline’ or what ‘must’ be given, while associating the more favoured approach with active organisational engagement. And in each case they mark ‘difference’ through the category ‘minority ethnic’. Despite the association of ‘diversity’ with multiplicity, this category, often referenced by the term ‘BME’ (black and minority ethnic) dominated our interviews above all others:

Lots of people, when they talk about diversity in the voluntary sector, actually mean BME people... (Senior manager, funding organisation).

Communities, targeting and the ‘hard to reach’

The reference made above to the ‘advantage’ of employing ‘black people’ reflects how the category ‘minority ethnic’ is generally linked to the idea of separate ‘communities’. These communities are in turn associated with the widely held idea – linked to discourses of access and social inclusion – that the services of voluntary organisations should be particularly targeted at groups located outside the ‘mainstream’ of society. In the following extract, the interviewer’s question was prompted by the fact that so far in the interview, ‘target’ groups had been discussed only in relation to ethnicity:

Interviewer: ‘when you mentioned about hard to reach populations were you primarily thinking of ethnic community groups or do you have other groups, populations that you’ve identified…’

‘Are you including travellers under ethnic populations?’

Interviewer: ‘we haven’t defined them as such […]’

‘I’d include them as hard to reach’ (Chief executive, voluntary agency)

This exchange is interesting because it raises the question whether to be ‘hard to reach’ is necessarily to be ethnically different. The group in question – travellers – are highly stigmatised and the subject of much hostility. The next interviewee described the efforts undertaken by one voluntary organisation to address this hostility:
‘What the Travellers’ Support group is looking at […] is actually enforcing that out into the public and saying well look at lot of them are in your community already. The ones that have had to actually come away from their travelling lifestyle are possibly living next door to you, you don’t realise it. And it’s kind of saying to them ‘they’re not all bad’ and like any community there is a minority in anything that people aren’t always keen on’ (Diversity project worker, infrastructure organisation).

She suggests that separated from their ‘lifestyle’ travellers are indistinguishable from the ‘public’, and in her account highlights the ambiguities around the term ‘community’. In this extract ‘in your community’ appears to refer to the geographical locality in which people live, whereas ‘like any community’ implies the ‘community’ to which travellers are attached. In the next example ‘community’ is attached to religion:

‘We are – trying to get some outreach programmes to communities that we haven’t reached before […] perhaps particularly Muslim communities and you know I think that’s very much for political reasons, though we’re not supposed to be political but it is – and also because those are – those are large communities and significant ones’ (Diversity manager, voluntary agency).

The reference here to ‘communities’ in the plural suggests that there is not one ‘Muslim community’ but many. However this multiplicity is associated not with different sects or divisions within Islam, but with the different ethnic minorities whose members practise Islam. In this context the marker ‘Muslim’ is presented not as a neutral description, but as a political category and it is this that provides the rationale for targeting these groups.

In the next account the targeting of ‘BME’ groups also appears as ‘political’ in its associations with the agenda of the project’s funders (the Local Authority). The interviewee describes the effect of this agenda as running counter to the aim of achieving ‘diversity’ amongst the client group and as having a negative effect in terms of ‘integrating’ their clients within ‘society’:

‘As a project worker I was based in […] and one thing we struggled within that team was – we very much had a over-representation of BME groups within our services and as far as [Local Authority] were concerned that – that they were really happy with that […] they
wanted to see that we were supporting more you know black minority ethnic groups [...] but locally we had an issue with that [...] we wanted our accommodation, our houses really to be kind of bit more representative of a cross-section you know of the community and we wanted more kind of you know more European groups to be represented erm you know we got like an Italian man in we were like ‘oh brilliant!’ [...] We wanted it to be kind of not just people [from] Afro-Caribbean groups or to lead them to kind of integrate with other communities, cos that’s what you do in society and that’s what were trying to reflect in like opportunities in employment and things so we found that kind of an obstacle really in what we wanted to promote – diversity...’ (Project manager, voluntary agency).

The ambiguity attached to the label ‘community’ is once more apparent here. The interviewee expresses the desirability of the clients of a housing project reflecting the composition of the ‘community’. This again may be understood in relation to the locality in which they are housed, whilst the ‘other communities’ with which clients are expected to integrate may be taken to mean communities defined by ethnicity or nationality – this latter category represented by the marker ‘Italian’.

**Deconstructing ‘BME’**

The previous account provides yet another illustration of the priority attached to those who are marked through the signifier ‘BME’. Given this privileging, it is worth considering what ‘black’ means in this context, and why it is simultaneously both coupled with, and distinguished from ‘minority ethnic’. The next quote introduces the idea of ‘visibility’ as means of establishing difference:

‘I haven’t seen that many kind of visible minorities [amongst the employees] before and it kind of made sense because a lot of the client groups are kind of visible within minority groups so it’s kind of I suppose the argument that we can identify with our clients’ cultural background and experience in terms of trying to support them it really does make sense’ (project manager, voluntary agency).
The idea of visibility was alluded to earlier in relation to whether ‘travellers’ are ‘ethnically’ or ‘visibly’ different. Here it is linked to ‘minority’ group membership, which is in turn associated with ‘cultural’ difference. The speaker implies that membership of a ‘visible minority’ also involves having a particular ‘cultural background’. ‘Visible’ difference is usually associated with skin colour, understood as the basis of separation of ‘black’ from ‘white’. The question is raised therefore whether to be identified as ‘black’ is necessarily to be part of a distinct cultural group – suggested also in the earlier extract that sought to identify the ‘advantage’ associated with employing ‘black people’.

But if to be ‘black’ is to be also a member of a minority ethnic group, then why include it within the construction ‘BME’? Commentators on race and culture argue that the category ‘black’ should be understood primarily in relation to the politics of identity and the history of anti-racism: ‘Black is not a question of pigmentation. The Black I am talking about is a historical category, a political category, a cultural category’ (Hall 2000: 149). Brah and Phoenix (2004) associate the ‘cultural’ significance of ‘black’ not with a plethora of minority cultures, but as a unifying category used by women to assert a common black identity overriding cultural differences amongst them. However commentators also point to the erosion of the singular significance of ‘black’ as a category. Yuval-Davis argues that in Europe debates around race and ethnicity ‘concentrated on issues of migrant workers and refugees… and were not usually articulated in terms of black/white’ (Yuval-Davis 1999, 2.6) and Alexander (2002) claims that ‘black’ has been superseded as a unifying category within academic discourses and replaced by ‘ethnic and cultural diversity’. The ‘ME’ part of the construction ‘BME’ marks this increased emphasis on cultural diversity, reflecting the dominant ‘multicultural’ approach to ethnic relations and migrant settlement in the UK (Kelly, 2003). The coupling of ‘B’ with ‘ME’ reinforces the position that to be black is to be culturally ‘different’ from the norm of ‘whiteness’ – but in a non-specific way. All that is not ‘BME’ is classified as ‘white’, which as Bottero and Irwin (2003) point out is empty as a cultural identity, so that white experience is inevitably normalised and unproblematised.

In the preceding quote this interviewee had, through her reference to ‘we’, placed herself within the category of ‘visible minority’. But later in the interview she disassociated herself from the ‘cultural beliefs’ of some of the organisation’s ‘BME’ employees, counter-posing an ‘entitlement to express cultural beliefs’ with ‘respect for everybody’s difference’. She questions whether people have the freedom to express themselves in ways that might be disrespectful to ‘minorities’ constructed along another line of difference, concerned with sexuality:

‘I’ve worked with [organisation] now over 18 months and both my staff teams kind of staff makeup very much from kind of you know BME groups, African background origins, now I’m half Nigerian myself […] as much as we have a policy you know that we respect everyone’s difference you know with sexuality and things like that […] in a diverse organisation we all can express ourselves in what type of way we choose, but some people are offended by it and they feel that they expressing their own cultural belief and they should be entitled to and which they are, by expressing it sometimes it’s kind of not necessarily, it’s not appropriate’

This interviewee had earlier made a positive association between having ‘visible minorities’ amongst the staff and the capacity of the organisation to support its clients – based on the idea of ‘shared background and experience’, in line with conventional accounts of organisational diversity as necessarily ‘useful’. She went on however, to describe the ‘difference’ of some
employees as running counter to the organisation’s ethos and principles concerning clients, rendering this same diversity problematic:

‘Within the front line staff a lot of people of non-western origin their approach is very much – I suppose quite authoritarian? I’m making a generalisation not intending to – but in terms of my experience has been [...] this authoritarian approach kind of – we work with people that have challenging behaviour [...] because there are cultural norms that people are strict and – strict parents, strict parenting their approach to service users is OK is well all you need is discipline and that’s what people have in prison and that kind of institutional behaviour that people form and [...] as much as routine’s good and a lot of our clients have chaotic life styles and don’t have routine – we try and undo a bit of it, kind of make people question things and be a bit more open [...] you’ve got to kind of adapt to society [...] and therefore there is kind of a cultural approach from some staff members to the clients it’s kind of adopt a style which is authoritarian as opposed I think maybe the organisation on paper has a bit more of a liberal approach...’

In this extract her use of ‘we’ may be taken as reference to her membership, not of a minority group, but of the organisation, and by marking the problem employees in terms of their ‘non-western’ origins, a binary opposition is created between liberal ‘western’ organisational values and illiberal, authoritarian ‘non-western’ values. Although she struggles not to generalise or stereotype it’s worth pointing out that it is of course not only ‘non-westerners’ who hold punitive and authoritarian attitudes. What is implied here however is that if such beliefs are claimed to be intrinsic to membership of a particular cultural group, then they cannot easily be challenged or confronted. Her concerns reflect Anthias’s (2002) critique of versions of multiculturalism that prioritise the ‘culture of communities’ over issues of gender rights. To suggest that beliefs and practices associated with community membership are immutable and unchallengeable is to perpetuate an essentialised and homogenised view of cultural differences.

The difficulties revealed in the preceding extract can be linked to the ‘ME’ part of ‘BME’ in that they are related to cultural beliefs. In contrast, in the following example, where ‘BME’ is associated with disadvantage and exclusion, the issue may be taken to relate more to the ‘B’ – if ‘black’ is taken to represent acknowledgment of racism and discrimination against a generic non-white ‘other’. What is interesting in this extract is that the speaker contrasts BME young women (who formed the majority of the scheme’s clients in London) with ‘non-BME’ young women (from a provincial town), on the basis that it is clients from the latter category whose performance more closely matches that associated with the victims of disadvantage and exclusion:

‘I visited a scheme in [London borough] recently and what was particularly interesting was that – we were housing 16-17 year olds which had been in care and young women who were at college they were talking about going to university and they were very focused, very driven and – and yet I’ll then match that up against a scheme that we’re into [provincial town] and again young women but they were just excluded you know their motivation was very low, their expectation was very low and if you sort of marry that up in terms of diversity profile you’ve got – the general view would be people from BME backgrounds would be generally disadvantaged and discouraged [...] the fact that BME tenants [from London borough] who had the higher expectations they wanted to go on and improve their life...’ (Senior manager, voluntary agency).
The puzzlement expressed here reflects how ‘exclusion’ has largely been constructed in relation to only one axis of difference – that of ‘BME’. This extract provides another example of organisational work that counteracts stereotypes and also introduces the possibility that disadvantage is relative and contextual.

**Concluding comments**

From our research it appears that diversity and equality issues occupy a more central position in voluntary organisations than in other sectors, because they are more capable of integration into accounts of organisational aims, ethos and principles. And the issues are not confined to the areas of employment and HRM; instead they encompass a range of stakeholders – not only clients and paid employees, but also volunteers and trustees. The contribution of voluntary organisations in giving voice and representation to marginalised groups is reflected in two categories mentioned here – travellers and ex-offenders – that do not usually figure in organisational equality and diversity policies. The categories through which diversity is marked are thus extended beyond the ‘usual suspects’ so that organising in the sector involves the constructing of identities and subject positions – diversity defines the organisation rather than just being something that the organisation needs to manage.

Yet we also find that although diversity is supposed to involve multiplicity, in practice quite a narrow range of categories are applied. Ironically perhaps, given the contribution of feminist thinking to framing the field of equality and diversity, gender was barely mentioned. Instead the category ‘ethnic minority’, often formulated as ‘BME’, dominated above all others. In making sense of these discursive practices, it is important to recognise that such categories are not neutral or natural – they do not represent entities ‘found’ within the organisation’s environment, but instead they are constructed according to specific political agendas – for example the desirability attached to reaching out to ‘Muslim communities’. In this context the significance of external funders has been revealed in determining the ‘target
groups’ that organisations should focus their efforts on – and we have noted how the pursuit of people identified within a target group may actually run counter to an organisational aim of achieving diversity amongst its clients. It’s important also to consider how constructing difference in these terms contributes to the creation of binary oppositions – BME/non-BME, Western/non-Western, travellers/local community. Our attempt to deconstruct the signifier ‘BME’ has revealed how a complex spectrum of intersecting identity positions becomes reduced to a single category.

Conceived as a managerial project, managing diversity therefore involves marking and measuring ‘differences’ that are deemed significant in relation to achieving specific organisational objectives – for example identifying the ‘advantage’ attached to employing ‘black’ people. Such cases however assume that it’s not enough to ‘be’ black – it’s also necessary to be part of a ‘community’ and to help the organisation gain access to that community. They thus require a particular kind of performance associated with category membership – a requirement not required of the normalised ‘white’ employee. But against this tendency to restrict possibilities of being and performing are examples of ‘multiple performances’ – illustrated here by the multiple ways of performing the identity of ‘ex-offender’. We have also noted ‘unexpected’ performance involving young ‘non-BME’ women behaving in a way more consistent with disadvantage and exclusion than their ‘BME’ counterparts.

So alongside this tendency to simplify and reduce we have discussed examples of ‘working with difference’ that revealed and highlighted the complexity associated with particular markers of difference and sameness, and the limitations of considering difference along only one specific axis. We therefore propose that a transforming approach to equality and diversity conceived as an emancipatory project is based on exposing and incorporating complexity, not reducing it. Such an agenda involves not only confounding and disrupting generalisations and stereotypes, but also revealing the limitations, inadequacies and contradictions amongst the categories that are used to mark differences and deconstructing the naturalised assumptions that are involved. These processes are not only of theoretical or ideological interest, but have practical implications. For example we’ve explained how accounts of equality and diversity in the sector are very much focused on including and
involving ‘ethnic minority communities’. A problem was identified in one organisation where the expression of cultural beliefs associated with community membership appeared to contradict the organisation’s ethos. Such beliefs seem hard to challenge but, Anthias (2002) argues, responsibilities and rights should not be understood only in relation to membership of a specific community – ‘the boundaries of citizenship are not coterminous with belonging to a community in the singular’ (Anthias, 2002:279-80). Such arguments suggest the interesting idea of developing an agenda for equality and diversity based on dialogue and discussion of the meaning of ‘organisational citizenship’ in relation to the rights, responsibilities, recognition and tolerance of the multiple and intersecting memberships and affiliations held amongst the organisation’s stakeholders.

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