

## Everyday Multiculturalism in the Public Library: Taking Knitting Together Seriously

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/soc](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/soc)**Katherine Robinson**

Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

### Abstract

This article brings recent discussions of everyday multiculturalism into a context which has had little sociological attention – the public library. Focusing on a south London library's newly established knitting group, made up of predominantly older women from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, I show how the library's framing of multiculturalism, limited to either celebratory occasions or targeted interventions for vulnerable groups, was unable to recognise the knitting group as an everyday multicultural space. Using an ethnographic approach which 'takes seriously' the ordinariness of knitting together, I show how the library setting provided the group with a reliable foundation, and attend closely to how, for its participants, the group became a space of multicultural recognition. I argue that the public library has capacity to anchor vital spaces of everyday multicultural conviviality which are not curated as special projects, and that the ordinary positioning of these spaces is integral to their formation.

### Keywords

diversity, everyday multiculturalism, knitting, ordinary, public libraries, 'race', recognition

### Introduction

This article discusses a new knitting group hosted by a branch library in Croydon, south London, as it became embedded into the library's regular activity programming. Made up of mainly middle-aged and older women from South Asian, African-Caribbean and white British and European backgrounds, its multicultural composition reflected the library's local community in Thornton Heath. However, the knitting group was not presented by the library as one of its official multicultural projects, which positioned racialised forms

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### Corresponding author:

Katherine Robinson, Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW, UK.

Email: [k.robinson@gold.ac.uk](mailto:k.robinson@gold.ac.uk)

of difference as either a celebration or an intervention. Through ethnographic analysis, I show how the knitting group became an important space of multicultural recognition for its participants precisely because it was not specifically instigated as a multicultural knitting project, and thus escaped the dualistic lens of other initiatives. Rather, positioned as one of many routine activities organised by the library, the knitting group was perceived by participants and library staff as both ordinary and dependable. I argue that the group's ordinary positioning within the library's organisational framework enabled it to become a space of understated connection and care. I thus show how public libraries have capacity to support vital spaces of multicultural life in semi-curated and unspectacular ways.

Attending to the dynamic of this library's knitting group as a site of 'everyday multiculturalism' (Wise and Velayutham, 2009: 15), this article makes a contribution to sociological discussions about the potential for public spaces to offer convivial sites of multicultural encounter and connection (Gidley, 2013; Gilroy, 2004; Jones et al., 2015; Neal et al., 2015), and develops these discussions by bringing them into the institutional context of the public library. The public library can be considered a 'micro-public', a 'prosaic site [. . .] of cultural exchange and transformation' (Amin, 2002: 959), which fosters conviviality through deliberate spatial arrangements and planned activities. Public libraries provide a vital public space; they can be a 'place of refuge' for young people (Back, 2013 [2007]: 60–61), and for those for whom public participation is not a given, such as older people, or people made vulnerable through insecure housing or immigration status (Robinson, 2015). In showing the interplay between the knitting group's public library context, and the sometimes ambivalent forms of conviviality that emerge in the group, this article offers an ethnographic analysis that engages with the specificities of the group's institutional location, offering a sociological perspective on the work of everyday multicultural sociality in the library.

While the public library is used as a location in which to carry out sociological research with people (Neal et al., 2015; Watson and Saha, 2013; Wessendorf, 2014) there has been strikingly little sociological attention specifically to the public library. However, a growing body of research emerging in the UK addresses both the sociological richness of the public library in its own right, and positions public libraries as a compelling demonstration of the impact of government austerity policy (Corble, 2018; Hitchen, 2019; Norcup, 2017; Robinson, 2015; Robinson and Sheldon, 2019), as cuts to local authority budgets pose acute, existential threats to the UK's public library service (Flood, 2019; Swaffield, 2017).

This article is based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in public libraries in London and Berlin (Robinson, 2015). The fieldwork in London focused on Thornton Heath Library, which first opened in 1914 as part of a huge network of public libraries funded by Andrew Carnegie. In 2010 the library re-opened after a comprehensive renovation, which incorporated an accessible entrance and reconfigured the basement area, adding the Community Room, a space for activity sessions and home to the library's knitting group.<sup>1</sup>

The article is structured as follows. I first draw together key areas of literature, then contextualise Thornton Heath Library's location and detail the research methodology. Through linked ethnographic vignettes which evoke the knitting group's familiar routine, I introduce the group's core members. Next, I discuss how the library's Action Plan

uses Equalities legislation to frame institutional priorities around multicultural diversity and to channel these through carefully targeted project work.

I contrast this with the more inferential multicultural competency worked at by members of the knitting group – women who were practised at the ritual politeness and tactful gestures of public social life. This competency was accentuated through the library's familiar spaces and reliable routines and the conviviality of knitting together, leading to participants recognising their shared experiences and vulnerabilities. In conclusion, I argue for attention to how everyday multiculturalism can emerge in trusted public spaces that are semi-curated, emphasising how the positioning of the knitting group as 'ordinary', not an intervention, allowed conviviality and connection, as well as expressions of grief and loneliness, to emerge. The knitting group shows how vulnerability and need can take unspectacular forms and in this way, demonstrate how the library's ordinary activities also reflect library priorities.

## **Everyday Multiculture and the Public Library**

The public library is committed to a principle of openness (Muddiman et al., 2000) and the daily accommodation of a hugely varied public (CILIP, 2009; Roach and Morrison, 1998). Since the 1970s and 1980s UK public libraries have increasingly sought to represent and cater to a diverse society through the provision of activities and material for people differentiated through perceived needs or subject position (Durrani, 2014: 308–309; Newman, 2007; Puwar, 2016). However, Ahmed's (2012) important critique of institutional diversity work as the creation of policy that performs institutional engagement with diversity without being accompanied by meaningful changes in institutional practice can also be applied to the UK public library context. Specifically, early iterations of public library diversity work have been critiqued for being superficial (Muddiman et al., 2000), and for responding to a political issue with bureaucratic solutions (Newman, 2007: 898).

Predominantly located within local government systems of accountability (Goulding, 2006), the public library is aligned with local authority social inclusion and community cohesion agendas (Jones, 2013) which have developed in relation to UK legislation on discrimination and equality (Vincent, 2009). While data on ethnicity, age and gender are collected during library card registration, this only provides information about a subset of all users, as many regulars may not register (The Audience Agency, 2017: 51). While it is challenging for public libraries to accurately and comprehensively monitor who their users are, the latest annual government-administered Taking Part survey found higher public library use in England among Black and Asian ethnic groups (49.3%) than white ethnic groups (31.8%) (DCMS, 2018: 13).

In this article, I show how Thornton Heath Library's knitting group becomes a site of what Wise (2005: 185) calls 'place-sharing' where, 'forms of reciprocity and mutual recognition between ethnically different individuals' emerge. The institutional configuring of the commonplace conviviality (Gilroy, 2004) shared among this racially diverse group of older women thus conveys intentionality beyond conceptualisations of everyday multiculturalism as an "'accident" of propinquity' (Wise, 2009: 21) or as 'rubbing along' (Watson, 2006). Speaking to Hall's (2015: 866) call for a 'sociology of exchange

beyond encounter', I show how the knitting group offers insight into the ethics and practices of intentional public conviviality and connection, with the library's activity programming providing the scaffolding for deliberately coming together across perceived differences (Amin, 2002: 970).

In its unexceptional multicultural constituency, this library's knitting group might be understood as exemplifying 'commonplace diversity' (Wessendorf, 2014), a consideration of multicultural proximity as so ordinary as to be considered almost banal. However, I argue that the knitting group's everyday multiculturalism is neither inconsequential, nor inevitable. Sociological work on the everyday has opened out ways to articulate the importance of the supposedly mundane: 'and ask what is at stake in our daily encounters' (Back, 2015: 821). Reflecting the continued resonance of Back's (1996: 7) account of 'the metropolitan paradox', Wise cautions that the lens of the everyday encompasses fraught conjunctures: '[p]ower and histories of racism are as much a part of the everyday picture as convivialities and affinities' (in Neal, 2015: 993). Working with this tension, I seek to move the knitting group into what Lewis (2007: 868) describes as the 'crucible of the ordinary', showing how racialised forms of recognition and exclusion 'saturate the everyday' (2007: 884), even while the library's institutional frameworks struggle to consider these as ordinary.

The incorporation of a knitting group into the repertoire of Thornton Heath Library's activities reflects knitting's popular revival (Kay, 2017), supported by online platforms such as Ravelry.com that connect knitters and share patterns (Lewis, 2011), and often characterised by inverting knitting's domestic associations (Turney, 2009), whether through the 'craftivism' of political knitting (Close, 2018), knitting as art (Hemmings, 2010) or knitting meet-ups in late-opening cafes and bars (Stoller, 2003). In their research with knitters in north-west England and North Wales, however, Harrison and Ogden found that representations of 'new' knitting as 'young, cool, connected and woke' (2019: 457) held little traction for their research participants (2019: 458). Their emphasis, on valuing 'ordinary or mundane knitting' (2019: 455), builds on research that has critiqued the gendered value assumptions in which knitting, and women's craft and leisure more broadly, is entangled (Stalp, 2015; Turney, 2009). Harrison and Ogden (2019: 458) acknowledge that 'BME knitters have been entirely neglected' in research, despite the recognised importance of knitting (Hamilton-Brown, 2017) and dressmaking (Tulloch, 2016) as craft practices among African-Caribbean communities. Indeed, assumptions linked to knitting's 'invisible aesthetic of whiteness' (Close, 2018: 880) may have contributed to Thornton Heath Library's knitting group not being specifically recognised as a library session that attracted racially diverse participation.

Noble's (2009: 49) consideration of everyday cosmopolitanism as 'ongoing work', rather than as a disposition, and Mitchell's (2007: 716) discussion of 'intimate cosmopolitanism', a re-articulation of cosmopolitanism through 'embodied and lived' practices are helpful in analysing the ordinary work of knitting together. I show how knitting's embodied and rhythmic movements support 'hopeful gestures' (Wise, 2005: 182), opening out the possibilities for recognition and connection that 'come [. . .] out of shared practice, out of doing something together' (Noble, 2009: 62). However, gestures can be ambiguous and therefore risky, and alongside moments of connection, I show how knitting's gestures can also open out moments of embarrassment and incomprehension. The

knitting group can be understood as a space of ‘haptic habitus’ (Wise, 2010: 917), where the ‘sensory responses, and emotional, affective grammars’ (Wise, 2010: 935) of multicultural being together are worked at in uneven ways through knitting’s embodied and material practices.

## Methodology – Place and People

Lying on the northern fringes of the borough of Croydon, nine miles out of central London, Thornton Heath reflects Watson and Saha’s (2013: 2017) observation that, ‘multicultural diversity is simply a fact of life in London’s erstwhile predominantly white suburbs’. Bensham Manor ward, where Thornton Heath Library is located, has a BME (‘Black and Minority Ethnic’) population of over 80 per cent (Croydon Observatory, 2018). Gunaratnam (2003: 17) argues that the term ‘ethnic minority’ does racialised, attributive work; prefiguring ‘whiteness’ as the invisible norm. And in Bensham Manor, where ethnic diversity is the *majority* experience, the category of ‘BME’ is empirically inadequate and lacks descriptive traction.

It is more productive then, to try to convey ethnographically the ‘textured complexities’ (Watson and Saha, 2013: 2032) of this multicultural area. On my way to the library, after walking down the hill from the station and the large Tesco, I would follow a busy road lined with small, family-run retail and restaurants, phone shops, tattoo parlours, car washes and garages, passing a Hindu temple, a marriage bureau, a nursery and several churches. The library sits towards the residential end of the road, surrounded by semi-detached housing occupied by inter-generational families and near several large, run-down villas that provide temporary accommodation. This is a variegated ordinariness, mundane and unprepossessing until a moment of crisis (Robinson, 2012). Throughout my fieldwork, hoardings remained along London Road, a visible reminder of a large fire during the 2011 riots which broke out across England after the police shooting of Mark Duggan in Tottenham.

Assessing the rich and longstanding sociological interest in the everyday, Neal and Murji (2015: 812) evocatively locate this in the inbuilt tensions between the ‘givens’ of the routine familiarity of the everyday, and its dynamic and uncertain potential. Their description of the compelling pull of the everyday reflects the dynamics of the public library, where organisational routines interweave with the unpredictability of an open, public space. Offering ‘granular attention to the texture of lived experience’ (Gidley, 2013: 374), through careful description, my ethnographic approach seeks to give insight into the complex multiplicity of everyday life in Thornton Heath Library, showing how mundane practices are constitutive of social relations.

The research followed British Sociological Association (BSA) ethical guidelines and successfully underwent the LSE’s ethics review process. I initially gained formal permission to conduct ethnographic research from library managers but throughout my research, access was repeatedly re-negotiated through face-to-face reminders and requests to different groups of research participants. The knitting group started in September 2011, and over four months, I attended seven of the fortnightly sessions. I introduced the research and sought consent by distributing an information sheet to participants, in which I explained the ethnographic method of participant observation and promised anonymity.

While pseudonyms are used for all research participants, both library users and staff, the library and its local area are not anonymised, as a political commitment to the significance of representations of places (Hall, 2012: 26).

After this formal beginning which emphasised my researcher role, my presence at the sessions developed into low-key participation, facilitated by my positionality as another female knitter. I brought along some knitting each session and made slow progress while joining in conversations and observing people knitting (Prigoda and McKenzie, 2007: 97). I carried out tape-recorded interviews with three of the group and supplemented these with informal conversations with other participants, after the sessions, and when encountering them at other library activities. I wrote fieldnotes immediately after each library visit and thematically analysed these and material from interviews and discussions, along with documents produced by the library and the local authority.

Free of charge and run as a drop-in, the knitting group's informality produced a shifting composition of regular attendees and new faces, some of whom came only once. While each session attracted between 10 and 12 women, over the months I attended the group, I noted approximately 20 different participants, around half with South Asian backgrounds, a quarter African-Caribbean and a quarter white British or white European. While these labels can lead to a truncated understanding of identity and positionality, 'fixing' difference (Neal et al., 2015: 467), they convey a sense of the group's mixity. Approximately four women participants appeared to be under 40 years old, the rest were over 50, and some were in their 70s. These characteristics are based on inference, reflecting the group's casual and unpredictable attendance and my approach to participant observation, which, following Gidley's (2013: 368) call for 'situated observation: attending to the doing rather than the saying of identities', was grounded in how people wished to present and locate themselves through conversation and through their knitting. I understand this as 'taking seriously', which builds on Noble's (2009: 61) use in his discussion of respectful recognition as constitutive of intercultural living together, and as a way of valuing this ordinary gathering. 'Taking it seriously' was how Shauna, one of the knitting group's most committed participants, described the invested engagement that the women brought to the sessions. Shauna, along with Margaret, Smita and Pearl, attended every fortnight, and consequently, these women have become the key figures through which the 'intimate, intricate stories' (Neal, 2015: 993) of the knitting group unfold.

## **'What Are You Working on?' Introducing the Library Knitting Group**

The knitting group met in the library's basement Community Room, an all-purpose space lined with stacks of chairs, and storage boxes of activity equipment and children's toys filling the corners. In the middle of the room were several tables that had been pushed together, surrounded by red plastic chairs. On alternate Friday mornings, as the women knitters started to enter the room and gather around the table, Sarah, one of the librarians, would lay out some knitting needles and wool, along with a selection of library books about knitting and crafts, and a small pile of knitting magazines. Library staff were encouraged to develop activity sessions and one-off events. Sarah, herself a keen knitter, had initiated the knitting group, making promotional fliers on the library's office

computer and procuring knitting materials. Sarah performed a mediatory role in the group, occasionally drawing the group's collective attention to a particularly fine piece of knitting, or a finished item, and guiding people towards each other to share their skills and knowledge, saying, 'We all help each other with our projects.' Sarah would start each knitting session by slowly circling the table of women, asking, 'What are you working on?' This question provided a useful introductory overture (McKenzie et al., 2006: 127), a starting point for interaction that was almost exclusively complimentary, and frequently inferred a sense of people's lives and their relationships (Turney, 2012).

Margaret, an accomplished knitter, introduced herself as from a line of local craft-people, saying proudly, 'we have master bakers in the family!' During the sessions, she worked on a large green jumper, its bulk heaped about her, her needles quickly clicking. Margaret recommended local craft shops and also shopped via QVC, which she said she enjoyed watching because of its lack of swearing. Shauna, another highly skilled knitter, spent several weeks working on intricately patterned squares for a baby blanket she was making in anticipation of her granddaughter's birth. One session, with the blanket nearing completion, Sarah encouraged Shauna to sit next to Margaret so she could show her how to invisibly join the squares together, by gently complimenting both their knitting.

Smita was making an extended visit to her daughter's family as part of her regular seasonal movement between Bangalore, where her husband remained in their home, and London and New York, where she spent time with her daughters and grandchildren. Over several weeks, Smita re-familiarised herself with the knitting skills she had learned as a child, by knitting a lilac scarf for her beloved granddaughter. One morning, with the scarf finished, Smita started to cast on stitches for a matching hat. Unsure of how many were needed to make it the right size, she approached Huma, another knitter, to ask if she might use the scarf to measure the head of her young daughter. Smita engaged brightly with the little girl, gently wrapping the half-finished scarf around her head. Literally binding others into her project, Smita's actions illustrate how knitting's inferential familiarity is emphasised by physical closeness.

Pearl attended the knitting sessions with her friend Bernice. A reserved, older woman, Pearl told me that while she was an experienced dressmaker, she was completely new to knitting. As the weeks passed, Pearl made almost no progress with a small piece of knitting, repeatedly starting, unravelling and re-starting, and winding the wool into knots and tangles. Noticing this, others in the group attempted to help her. One session, Margaret sat next to Pearl, and taking Pearl's knitting into her own hands, used a childhood rhyme to accompany an emphatic demonstration of each movement that formed a stitch: 'rabbit goes *down* the hole. . .'. This seemed an ambivalent moment – Margaret's well-meaning intervention both illustrates how embodied forms of teaching are embedded in memories of learning to knit but its childish tone could also potentially offend. Margaret's offer of advice and Pearl's acceptance of it shows how knitting's skill sharing can open out an uncertain and vulnerable space for both learner and teacher.

These vignettes, introducing the key figures of the group through their knitting, also convey what Sennett (2008: 289), making connections between the routine and repeated practice of craftwork and the work of making relationships, calls 'techniques of experience'. Sennett's phrase gets to the heart of the practised social competency that the women brought to their participation in the knitting group, and how their engagement

with knitting's techniques and materiality was the foundation for the gradually developing connections among the group.

## **Institutional Multiculturalism**

In Thornton Heath Library, the introduction of the knitting group was part of a wider expansion of the library's activities after its major renovation. As part of their Big Lottery funding, the library developed four outreach and engagement projects, alongside a revitalised and expanded programme of library reading and activity groups, to increase user numbers and levels of participation. Alongside these projects, the borough-wide Library Service Action Plan provided an additional framework for specific library initiatives. The Plan clustered library targets to align with the categories in the borough's Community Strategy<sup>2</sup> (Croydon Strategic Partnership, 2010), aiming activities at groups who, under the 2010 Equalities Act, have protected characteristics. Attendance figures at library activity groups were logged and used in annual progress reports as evidence that the library was fulfilling its targets and strategic aims within the Library Service Action Plan. Following Neyland (2008: 121), I discuss these documents as meaningful in both what they describe and how they are used.

The library's projects and Action Plan focus institutional priorities on specific audiences – young people, asylum-seeking adults, vulnerably housed families and elderly people with limited digital skills – along perceived axes of vulnerability and need. What this approach omits however, is direct consideration of how these axes might also be racialised. This conforms to a documented shift in local authority discourse from multiculturalism to 'community cohesion', which 'has enabled a de-racialization of language' (Worley, 2005: 484) and the locating of 'race' as one of many issues under an Equalities agenda (Lewis and Craig, 2014). In the Action Plan, 'race' is indicated specifically in relation to only two activities: the promotion of library Black History Month events and a project to introduce the library to 50 refugees and asylum seekers. These activities demonstrate a dichotomous rendering of 'race' which is demarcated as either a celebratory event or as a grievous vulnerability. Library frameworks lack a space in which to articulate 'race' in an 'ordinary' way, and in practice, 'community' emerges as a proxy for 'race'.

Kay, a librarian, described the knitting group to me as, 'a nice gathering, it's a social gathering, but they're learning a new skill, [ . . . ] and getting the community together'. Kay's account of 'getting the community together', echoes the language of the local authority's strategy documents, which avoided direct reference to 'race', ethnicity or multiculturalism, and instead folded allusions to these complex terms into diffuse and aspirational phrases, such as, 'by bringing local people together, from all backgrounds and across all ages Croydon's sense of community and cohesiveness will be regarded as a European exemplar of a safe and caring city' (Croydon Strategic Partnership, 2010: 10). At the same time, 'community' can be understood as a 'coded term' that is implicitly racialised (Jones, 2013: 31, citing Solomos, 1988: 105). In this way, Kay both alludes to and leaves unspoken the highly racially and ethnically diverse constituency of 'the community' surrounding Thornton Heath Library, which is both manifestly reflected in the knitting group's membership while remaining officially unacknowledged.

Sarah told me that the knitting group had been originally named a ‘knit and craft’ group to encourage men to attend. The expectation that the group *should* have a gender mix reflects institutional concern to be ‘open to all’ (Muddiman et al., 2000) and reluctance to present library activities as gendered. Despite official unease with gender segregation, however, all-women spaces almost inevitably emerge through public library activities linked to craft or aimed at young children (McKenzie et al., 2006).

Exploring how the knitting group is positioned within the library’s organisational frameworks shows how public libraries navigate between strategic expectations on outreach, openness and diversity, and accommodate unintended outcomes which have an ambiguous relationship with official policies. The library’s outreach and engagement projects and Action Plan produce a rendering of who constitutes an appropriate audience that is structured through measures of vulnerability and celebratory events. At a time of limited library capacity and acute local social need, the knitting group, described by Kay as, ‘a nice gathering’, appears both mundanely routine, and to sit outside priority indices. However, the knitting group offers a chance to reconsider these frameworks – to consider more inferential and everyday forms of multiculturalism, to acknowledge the valuable stability offered by library routines, and to recognise more ordinary forms of vulnerability.

## Inferential Multiculturalism

The library’s institutional rendering of multicultural diversity can be compared with the more inferential, and sometimes implicit, ways in which members of the knitting group reflected on multicultural living together. Pearl, one of 10 brothers and sisters, had found sustenance in being among others at the library since her move to the area, ‘I’m accustomed to the crowd’, she said, telling me that she did not need to talk to people: ‘Just seeing them and looking at them, that’s enough for me. I know they are friendly – I mean, if they are not friendly it’s different – it puts you off.’ Pearl’s comfort in quietly being among others, who she is able to inferentially read as friendly, has its roots in her childhood but her acuity of social judgement has been practised through her lifelong commitment to church and other voluntary activities. Reflecting how co-presence can itself communicate commonalities among strangers (McKenzie et al., 2006: 122), Pearl’s tacit recognition of sympathetic strangers also speaks to how public participation in an ethnically diverse place can itself signal ‘a disposition to social mixing’ (Neal et al., 2015: 471).

Among other knitting group regulars, there was an understated awareness of their diversity as a sign of the group’s vitality and sociability. ‘It’s like with my lace making group’ said Margaret one morning, stitching at a tablecloth, ‘we’re all very different, but we all get on, and we help each other’. Margaret did not define ‘difference’, concentrating on how in spite of difference, these groups were characterised by their friendly and collaborative nature. Smita spoke of how discovering the knitting group had made the library an experience of multicultural sociality for her. ‘I would come and read the newspapers, read the Indian news, but it was very quiet’, she said. ‘I didn’t know anyone; it was boring. You wouldn’t get such a cosmopolitan group as this!’ Smita’s playful reference to cosmopolitanism presents the knitting group’s mixedness as a form of lively sociality that had animated her engagement with the library.

Just as inferences about people's relationships could be made through the items they were knitting, during the knitting sessions, inferential expressions of multicultural living together emerged through allusions to difference and diasporic experiences that were enfolded within anecdotes, generalities, references to childhood memories, and talk of family elsewhere. Reminiscing about learning to knit as a child, for instance, Smita talked of her experiences at convent school in Bangalore, where she was taught by Irish nuns, and learned to be, as she joked, 'prim and proper'.

While these snippets of migratory stories were shared light-heartedly, an awkward exchange between Pearl and Smita showed how assuming someone had a migratory story could provoke discomfort. During one session in early December, Pearl said she had 'just arrived' in Thornton Heath, after living in Balham for 30 years. 'Where are you from, *originally*?' asked Smita curiously, Pearl's mention of 'arrival' seeming to prompt her to ask Pearl about a presumed earlier arrival. 'Balham', replied Pearl, firmly, her deliberate avoidance of the question's obvious inference indicating to Smita that she had overstepped a line. This moment held what Gunaratnam (2003: 140) names, 'insecurity of meaning', a space of ambiguity that demands attention to questions of ethical responsibility. The question posed by Smita can never be innocent – it asks for a particularly freighted accounting of the self and it placed demands on Pearl that she was not prepared to meet in that moment.

These moments from the knitting sessions show how references to multiculturalism were bound up in the textures of everyday lives, emerging through allusions, jokes and generalities; coming in and out of focus. Acknowledging when questions of racialised difference are refused or left open moves away from the categories assumed in library frameworks and shows that a refusal to define can offer a powerful resource.

## Becoming a Regular

As the knitting sessions became established as a regular Community Room activity, I noticed that women I recognised from other library activities were deliberately 'looking in' on the group. Marilyn, who I had first met at a library-run reading group, became a regular at the knitting sessions without ever actually knitting. Instead, joining the knitters at the table, she stayed to chat. The knitting group accommodated a range of routes to becoming a regular. Some other women who dropped in would signal their experience as craftswomen by describing projects they had made, or expertly commenting on the pattern books they flicked through. Marilyn was open about dropping by for purely social reasons. Entering the room after the Christmas break, she announced, 'I've come to renew my acquaintance with the group'. This broader familiarity with the group is built on the rhythms of repeated participation, as Hall (2012: 98) writes, 'of knowing and being known through returning to the same spaces, engaging with familiar faces'.

This ease with which the knitting group was recognised by non-knitters as a social space through casual, yet familiar forms of association also emerges out of knitting's almost synonymous relationship with convivial sociality. As Prigoda and McKenzie (2007: 110) discuss, knitting is used as the ostensible 'reason to gather', reflecting how historically, women's craftwork umbrellas social ties and familial caring responsibilities

(Stalp, 2015; Turney, 2009). Knitting's purposeful legitimacy is here bolstered by the group's dependable public library setting.

Sarah's role was vital to the developing recognition among participants of the knitting group as a trusted and convivial space. Despite her invitation to collective responsibility, Sarah's understated facilitation of the group and her position as a library staff member signalled to participants that the library was responsible for the knitting group. Sarah's reliable presence contrasted with library managers' understanding of staff involvement in activities as integral to their 'start up' phase, but not as a long-term commitment, expecting library users to eventually 'take ownership' of groups.<sup>3</sup> While this was presented as a way of developing community-led library engagement, and 'empowering' library users, the ambition for the library's groups to evolve so that they no longer needed library staff did not recognise the importance of Sarah's commitment to the group.

The regularity of the knitting sessions was accompanied by developing familiarity between the women knitters, signalled by expressions of kindness and moments of intuitive connection. One session in early January, standing beside Pearl before they settled into the group around the table, Margaret took a book out of her handbag and gave it to Pearl, saying, 'Something made me bring this today – I was thinking of who might want it and I thought of you, but if you don't want it, just give it away. He's a preacher', she went on, indicating the photo on the cover. 'I know this man', said Pearl, accepting the book, acknowledging that Margaret's trusting gesture, based on her recognition of Pearl as a woman of faith, had been well judged. Later that morning, as we talked in the library lobby, Pearl took the book out of her bag, and commented, 'I don't know why she give it to me. Maybe I find something in here for me.' This exchange between Margaret and Pearl illustrates a 'hopeful gesture' (Wise, 2005: 182), an overture of recognition, but also shows that this gesture can be ambivalent and uncertain.

The developing familiarity among participants in the knitting group was occasionally at odds with the capacity of the library to adequately respond. One Friday in late January, towards the end of the hour officially allocated to the session, Sarah came back from photocopying some knitting patterns for people, handed them out and prepared to leave those who remained, saying, 'but you're welcome to stay, it's nice and warm down here now'. Shauna interjected, in a joking tone, 'But where's the coffee?' Sarah gave a slightly pained smile and said,

I know – we used to be able to offer coffee and biscuits; we just don't have the budget for it now. But you're welcome to bring in cakes and things if you like. And we've got the drinks machine upstairs, so you could have a cup of tea for 50p, if you like – I'm sorry.

Faced with Sarah's obvious awkwardness, people murmured that she was not to worry and thanked her for her help, trying to smooth over her and Shauna's embarrassment.

Shauna's humorously intended remark reflects the warm and often light-hearted atmosphere in the knitting group. Its misfiring illustrates how the group's sociality is both founded in and exceeds the library's institutional capacity. The developing sense of the knitting group as a familiar social space is anchored by its regular scheduling and Sarah's dependable facilitation. This reliability resulted in different ways to become a regular, whether by knitting at every session or forming a looser association with the

group. Thinking back to the experientially gained social trust that Pearl expressed as a form of 'knowing', I argue that 'knowing' can also illustrate the security that comes from the dependability offered by the library. 'Knowing' that the knitting group was held together through the library's infrastructure makes it a safe place to open out connections among strangers. At the same time, this burgeoning sociality can be difficult for the library to accommodate.

## Ordinary Vulnerability

On several occasions during knitting sessions, Marilyn authoritatively remarked, 'we're all learning from each other'. Marilyn's words echo library staff member Kay's comment about the knitting group 'getting the community together and learning new skills'. However, as someone who appreciated the group purely for its sociality, Marilyn's words invite a broader interpretation of 'learning from each other'. Here, learning could mean, 'learning to be among each other', a developing sense of connection among the women in the knitting group as they offered each other reciprocal 'gestures of care and recognition' (Wise, 2005: 182).

Accepting Sarah's standing invitation to stay on after the end of the hour allocated to the knitting group, each fortnight a smaller group of knitters would remain in the Community Room. Warmed up into each other's presence through knitting's close physical gestures, knitting-related chat became conversation that strayed into fleeting intimations of grief, pain and loneliness. Confidences were shared unguardedly and intimate feelings were proffered as generalities, which, in being 'addressed to one and all' invited a response, as well as offering comfort (Das, 2012: 138). The understated tone in which experiences of grief and loneliness were shared increased their poignancy. Returning to Mitchell's theorisation of cosmopolitan intimacy, particularly its articulation through experiences of mourning and expressions of care, I show how these exchanges can be understood as moments of recognition, when 'the vulnerability and precariousness of the Other' (Mitchell, 2007: 711), is comprehended. Supported by knitting's haptic qualities, moments of affective connection arose between the women in this smaller circle; hopeful gestures which recognised each other's experiences of vulnerability, even while these did not register on the library's indices of priority.

One session in late January, with its officially allocated time long over, the conversation between the women still remaining in the Community Room circled around expressions of bereavement. Rithika, who had attended for the first time that day, responded to a question about whether she had children, saying, 'I have four daughters – two are alive.' 'It's the saddest thing to lose a child', responded Marilyn tenderly, 'the saddest thing'. Their brief exchange hung in the air.

Later, in the middle of a conversation about sewing machines, Marilyn commented that she could not face getting rid of her mother's machine after she had died, saying, 'it's so silly how we hang on to these things, they're just things'. The small group sought to reassure her, and Marilyn went on to talk more about how, at the time of her mother's death, she had found comfort in returning to her mother's church. Immediately after Marilyn brought up the loss of her mother, Rithika spoke of the death of her husband, becoming upset when she said he had died last year. 'We were together 44 years', she

said in a rush, ‘and he did everything. And I don’t know how to do anything. That’s why I try to and come out, get out and do what I can.’ Acknowledging her grief, people murmured well-meaning clichés, ‘keep busy’, ‘you’ve just got to keep going’. ‘And think of others’, said Pearl resolutely, looking around at everyone, ‘we all know what it’s like to lose someone’, her firm care responding to Rithika’s effervescent grief.

In recognising that Rithika’s overwhelming grief was shared by others, Pearl offered this connection back to her as a resource. This moment of intense understanding speaks directly to Mitchell’s (2007: 710) discussion of mourning as a form of intimate cosmopolitanism, a shared experience that provides a foundation for connection. These exchanges, as bereaved women tenderly expressed care for each other seemed to form a chain of shared experience. This fragile but powerful moment escapes capture, impossible to describe as an ‘outcome’ in official metrics (Gunaratnam, 2013: 131), but powerfully demonstrates the library knitting group’s capacity to offer a dignified space of recognition and care that lies beyond its official parameters.

## **Conclusion – Taking Ordinary Multiculturalism Seriously**

This article has made a contribution to contemporary sociological debates on everyday multiculturalism by bringing this discussion into the context of the public library, a public space that despite its sociological richness, has been the focus of little sociological research. In exploring everyday multiculturalism through the tensions and possibilities offered by the public library’s knitting group, this article offers a fleshed-out example of the ‘micro-public’ (Amin, 2002: 959), showing how Thornton Heath Library’s librarian-led knitting group became a space of sociality and connection for a racially diverse group of predominantly older women.

A core contribution of this article is to explore what the framing of the knitting group as ordinary both enables and what it makes difficult. Acknowledging the library’s uneven history of curating multiculturalism (Muddiman et al., 2000; Newman, 2007), I have shown how library-facilitated activities that are not specifically championed as community cohesion projects have the potential to become multicultural spaces in more understated but still meaningful ways. Positioned as ‘that nice gathering’, held in the mundane space of the library’s basement Community Room, the knitting group is uncoupled from library framings of multicultural activities as acute interventions or celebratory moments, allowing it to develop into a trusting space of loose association and multicultural recognition.

At the same time, while the library’s semi-curation of the knitting group created a space for a more diffuse and unspectacular manifestation of multiculturalism, the institutional perspective of the knitting group’s ordinariness left little room to value the group as a multicultural space. I argue that an ethnographic approach which takes seriously the understated expressions of recognition, and the ‘hopeful gestures’ (Wise, 2005: 182) of connection among the knitting group’s participants, can show the significance of the knitting group as a space of ordinary multiculturalism.

Building on sociological scholarship about the work of everyday multicultural living together (Noble, 2009; Wise, 2009), I have made connections with research on how women’s communal craftwork is a gateway to valuable forms of sociality (Stalp, 2015;

Turney, 2009, 2012). Working from Mitchell's (2007: 716) understanding of 'intimate cosmopolitanism', I have shown how knitting's tactile gestures and practices of generosity led a group of women to recognise each other's different experiences of migration, faith and grief in unspectacular but also affecting, meaningful and sometimes awkward moments, which need to be taken seriously.

The final contribution of this article is thus to show how recognising ordinary multiculturalism might help to reconfigure library matrices of priorities and evaluation. Careful ethnographic analysis of the everyday unfolding of the knitting sessions has shown how the group does align with the library's strategic aims but recognising this requires opening out a broader understanding of how to perceive both vulnerability and the celebratory. I suggest that 'taking seriously' the ways in which the library's knitting group can hold ordinary vulnerabilities, awkward moments and gestures of connection opens out space to acknowledge how, in the public library, ordinary multiculturalism is embedded into the everyday.

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### Notes

1. An overview of Thornton Heath Library's re-design is given here: <https://openhouselondon.open-city.org.uk/listings/4807>.
2. These categories are: 'an enterprising city'; 'a learning city'; 'a creative city'; 'a connected city'; 'a caring city' (Croydon Strategic Partnership, 2010: 9).
3. This reflects the ambition of Croydon's Community Strategy, which presents the borough as a place, 'where individuals and communities are supported to fulfil their potential and deliver solutions for themselves' (Croydon Strategic Partnership, 2010: 9).

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Katherine Robinson is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths. She is an ethnographer whose research explores issues in urban public space and everyday life in organisations. She has carried out research in public libraries in south London and Berlin, exploring questions of everyday urban multiculturalism, public participation and organisational capacity. She is currently undertaking research with a campaign to save public libraries in Lambeth, London.

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