

## **Inclusion and Exclusion Conference 2007: A Newcomer's View**

I arrived at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies around 9.00 a.m. on Monday 29<sup>th</sup> January, huffing and puffing, and most probably looking slightly distressed. My physical state stemmed from my rather foolish decision to carry all of the material to display on a stall from Camden Town Hall, which is a short distance by foot but seemed more akin to a half-marathon when toting a hefty box.

Colleagues dealing with conference arrangements soon put me at ease and I assembled the display of publications from the London Borough of Camden's Equalities and Social Inclusion Team at a leisurely pace, stopping for the occasional chat with other stallholders or delegates who arrived early. I was relieved to see a number of those attending stop by the stall and take away material, though at the same time my anxiety levels were high as I was due to present a paper in a couple of hours – not a new experience for me, but on the other hand not a recent one either.

Meanwhile, I was also keen to glean what I could from the opening plenary session, which ultimately proved a highlight of the day. Jabeer Butt on behalf of the Race Equality Foundation made an entertaining and insightful introductory speech, which perhaps inevitably (given the date) made reference to the media furore surrounding *Celebrity Big Brother* and in particular the racist behaviour of Jade Goody and other "house guests". Jabeer noted that in the week commencing 15 January BBC Radio 4's morning flagship, the *Today* programme had devoted 31 minutes to reporting of and discussions of the controversy emanating from the so-called reality TV show. He went on to remark on the ugly irony of certain tabloid newspapers that often carry lurid headlines about "immigration timebombs" and the "swamping of British culture" denouncing Jade Goody's crude racism.

Following Jabeer's opening speech, there was an excellent paper from the Manchester University sociologist, James Nazroo, on the topic of "conceptualizing ethnicity", particularly in the context of researching health issues. James' presentation stressed the historically and socially contingent character of ethnicity as a form of social identity. Overall, I felt that he had set the bar quite high, but Ann Phoenix from the Open University rose to the challenge with her paper on "conceptualising and recording ethnicity". Whilst covering some of the same territory as the James Nazroo paper, Ann provided a richly nuanced and politically challenging presentation. By the end of her talk I definitely wanted to know more about the research she had undertaken with white working class youth in Milton Keynes and Oxford.

Perhaps after two very engaging presentations, a talk from Ian Diamond on ESRC research policies regarding ethnicity was bound to suffer by comparison. Admittedly, I did find this presentation a bit dry, but it did spark something of a lively debate, which the lack of time curtailed.

The first plenary concluded, the time for my seminar presentation had arrived. My paper drew on research conducted in 2005, looking at refugees and the provision of mental health services in the London Borough of Camden. I won't indulge in self-criticism of either content or style here, but appreciated the intelligent questions posed by the colleagues who attended.

On to lunch, then, and though the food was forgettable, the company was not, with interesting and informative, if all too brief, chats with other local authority colleagues from Tower Hamlets and Essex. In the early afternoon I attended a thought-provoking workshop, introduced by Roiyah Saltus and Tony Hendrickson from South Wales. They offered a critical reflection on some of the benefits and challenges of voluntary sector / academic research partnerships and, using the eight Meleis criteria for culturally competent research (Meleis, 1996) and the values of community based organisations, we explored some issues to consider in commissioning and conducting research projects concerned with socially excluded populations.

Due to commitments in Camden I was not able to stay for the afternoon plenary. All told, though, I found the day a positive experience and very much hope that future events attract larger audiences, while maintaining the generally high standard on display at the January conference.

**George Binette**

**Reference:** Meleis, A. (1996) 'Culturally Competent Scholarship: Substance and Rigour' in 'Advances in Nursing Sciences' 19:2, 1-16.