Out of Sight, Out of Mind? Towards developing an understanding of the needs of 'hidden' minority ethnic communities

Neil Chakraborti, Jon Garland and **Basia Spalek** describe how assumptions and generalisations about ethnicity hamper research.

Recent years have witnessed what would appear to be an upsurge in the level of interest that criminologists have shown towards issues of ethnicity and 'race'. These issues have featured increasingly in discussions of crime, victimisation and criminal justice, and the ever-extending body of literature devoted to 'race' is testimony to ways in which researchers have drawn attention to its significance. Developing new lines of criminological enquiry has been of indisputable value in shifting popular focus away from constructed notions of 'black' deviance and criminality towards a more enlightened stance that has afforded recognition to the status of minority ethnic peoples as racialised victims of a discriminatory criminal justice system and as marginalised households who tend to suffer disproportionately higher rates of victimisation and greater fear of crime than the rest of the population. In addition to this wealth of academic studies, a series of landmark events, such as the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent inquiry and the *Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000*, have served to further publicise issues of 'race' and racialisation.

Nevertheless, despite the burgeoning body of knowledge that has developed on the 'minority ethnic experience' of crime and criminalisation, the distinct experiences of certain groups have been somewhat obscured within the broad assumptions that have been applied, almost systematically, to anyone falling under the label of 'minority ethnic'. Within such a term lie a host of traditionally 'hidden' peoples and 'hidden' forms of victimisation that have rarely received attention from criminological examinations of 'race', and, as shall be discussed, the often generalised, narrow and unwittingly exclusive academic discourse on this subject has allowed important considerations to go unnoticed. This paper will highlight some of these considerations, and in so doing will suggest some methodological implications that need to be borne in mind by those researchers seeking to investigate experiences of, and promote justice for, minority ethnic households.

The experiences of specific communities often remain hidden within generalised discourses that subsume specific identities and histories within very general categories and labels, such as those relating to 'minority ethnic', 'black' or the increasingly popular term 'BME'. Since April 2003, a new 16-point system of race and ethnic monitoring has been implemented by the Home Office and other agencies of the criminal justice system, relating to the categories used in the 2001 Census. Although this would suggest that a more nuanced approach to ethnicity is being adopted, since prior to this stage a nine-point system was used in line with 1991 Census categories, in practice the ways in which statistics are often collected and analysed in relation to offenders, suspects, victims, witnesses and employees of the criminal justice system is in accordance with a modified five-point format relating to the broader ethnic categories of black, white, Asian, Chinese & other, and mixed. This means that information about the experiences of particular ethnic groups or religious minorities are likely to remain hidden, so that any claims of discrimination, victimisation or bias that are made by these groups of individuals will not be easily substantiated.

As a result, it is of paramount importance that researchers cast their respective nets far and wide in their attempts to study the experiences of hidden minorities. Typically under-researched groups include Traveller communities and asylum seekers, both of whom have been subjected to a process of media demonisation and misrepresentation in recent times. People of dual heritage too are often overlooked by research that has failed to appreciate the extent to which such people can suffer distinct forms of victimisation as a result of the processes of non-acceptance that can operate against those who do not fall conveniently into a particular 'ethnic' category. Similarly, other 'hidden' peoples include white minority ethnic groups and rural minority ethnic households, whose own distinct experiences as numerically insignificant populations are again seldom analysed within a body of research that has preferred to focus either on highly visible minority groups such as black or South Asian communities, or on more urbanised environments with substantial numbers of minority ethnic inhabitants.

Muslim communities have also rarely been researched. Muslims belong to a diverse range of ethnic groups, including Afghan, Arab, Iranian,

Indian, Kosovan, Kurdish, Turkish, and Somalian. For a significant number of these individuals, religious affiliation is a fundamental aspect of their lives. This suggests that we need not only to take into account ethnicity, but also religious identity, and individuals' social experiences in relation to their faith. Indeed, according to the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, Muslims have become disillusioned with an anti-racism movement that refuses to combat Islamophobia. Specific attention should therefore be paid to the negative stereotyping of Muslims and the direct and indirect discrimination that they face.

Further to this, the individual characteristics of under-researched groups can often be obscured through popular reference to 'all-encompassing' notions of *community*. The term 'minority ethnic community' itself can give rise to the impression that shared spatial, historical and cultural characteristics exist amongst members of such a community, and this conception is given further credence by many researchers' dependence on the idea of so-called 'community leaders' being somehow representative of the beliefs held by the ethnic community to which they belong. Again,

of theoretical, practical and ethical dilemmas. One recurring theme relates to how we can articulate the specific experiences of individuals who belong to wider minority groups without adopting a wholly relativistic position that loses the political power contained within umbrella terms such as 'black' or 'minority ethnic'; terms which highlight shared experiences of oppression that can generate anti-discriminatory policies and practices. Researching hidden communities makes visible the dominant constructions of knowledge that operate within academic disciplines and wider social and political discourses, and so as researchers we need to be aware that our work may maintain and reproduce certain dominant power relations even whilst it is producing oppositional knowledge. Spalek's (2005) work, for instance, illustrates that whilst some aspects of a researcher's subjectivity can be linked to marginalised, outsider positions, which can help to produce oppositional knowledge, other aspects of self-identity may maintain and re-produce dominant racial and cultural discourses. At the same time, when analysing data there is a potential danger in trying to frame the voices of particular groups within a dominant academic discourse, since this may lead

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while this may be the case in certain instances, there is a danger that outdated and fixed perceptions of community assume a commonality in the thoughts and experiences of minority ethnic households that may not be shared by all, and particularly by under-researched groups (Kelly, 2003). A vivid illustration of this point is provided by the experiences of minority ethnic households based in rural areas, whose fragmented and dispersed distribution contrasts markedly with the homogenous notions of community afforded to similar households living in more urban, multi-cultural environments: indeed, the realities of rural life for the minority ethnic inhabitant have tended to suggest that the term minority ethnic 'community' is something of a misnomer in a rural context as such a community, along with its implied networks, numbers and peer group support, rarely exists (see Chakraborti and Garland, 2004). Another pertinent example that can be provided here is in relation to the enormous diversity of the 'Muslim community' in Britain. Muslim councillors, the representatives of local mosques or national organisations that claim to represent the wider Muslim community, do not necessarily reflect grassroots concerns, and therein lies the need for a more detailed exploration of the broader range of Muslim groups, such as women or young people, for consultation and for research.

Work with hidden communities poses a number

to those voices being silenced or misunderstood. As such, greater reflexivity upon the research process should be encouraged, so that not only are hidden voices heard, but their meaning is fully understood as well.

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