

Ethnicity, Harm and Crime: A response to the discussion paper by Will McMahon and Rebecca Roberts.

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In this response I begin by considering three aspects of the paper that presented important considerations, that were suggestive and fruitful and which stimulated me to reflect more widely: the question of 'community'; poor areas; and the emphasis on poverty. In the second part of the response, I outline some more specific observations and comments on the content of the paper and its scope. I conclude with some questions about the aims of the paper and its implications.

1. Points of reflection

What is meant by community?

The first aspect of this paper that drew my attention was in its opening epigraph, highlighting of specific uses of the term 'community'. The paper takes as its point of departure calls to community, which are employed when there is a perceived crisis of 'Black on Black' crime; calls which locate the 'problem' clearly within the 'Black community'. The paper points to the ways in which the term 'community' is used to encapsulate problems, to distance them from the majority, to make them 'other'. They thus become a responsibility not for mainstream services and institutions nor for general social conscience, but for self-regulation.

Calls to community also indicate the ways in which, by naming them, phenomena are apparently brought into existence, and become fixed reference points. It is the case that people's networks, connections, patterns of association are a source of increasing investigation and consideration: how they map onto identities and relate to life chances. These are all pertinent and interesting questions and show the ways in which different sorts of relationships and bases for relationships and sense of commonality can operate – and can operate simultaneously. But that in itself should lead to caution about how we speak about and allocate 'communities' and the assumptions that are made when communities are given fixed names and attributes.

Community can of course also be used to represent localities: collocations of individuals as well as aggregates of minority group members. Discussion of community cohesion, a major contemporary focus for policy, frequently emphasises how such physical communities are potentially fragile and fractured – they require the glue of cohesion – rather than being robust and self-contained. Community as groups with common characteristics and community as localities in which their very diversity may be the question deemed to be at issue, are competing representations; but they are frequently employed interchangeably by policy makers and by researchers, without sufficient scrutiny as to how they are being merged. A number of community studies employ 'community' to describe not only co-located individuals and families, but at the same time physical fabric and environment, and also idealised perceptions of a bygone age. In these studies, subjective perceptions of community, while important, need to be distinguished analytically from actual experience and history. Similarly, this paper prompts us to think about the extent to which the 'Black community' invoked by politicians is a subjective reality or summarises a range of experiences that result in relative disadvantage in aggregate, regardless of identification of subjective perception.

I extrapolate, then from this reflection, that we should be very careful about invoking community either as source of a phenomenon or as a solution. We would do better to stick to terms that can be clearly circumscribed and do not bring with them the normative weight associated with community.

Poor areas

As mentioned community is often regarded as meaning or as being coterminous with neighbourhood or area, which brings me to the second issue where, for me, the paper invited reflection. The paper spends some time pointing out how experiences which are attributed to the ethnicity of proponents can be understood instead as deriving from the poverty of areas: i.e. that it is place rather than ethnicity that is the crucial factor in understanding outcomes. This is an important point, but in emphasising it, it can be easy to forget that areas are made up of individuals and do not have properties of e.g. 'poverty' independent of that. We should not start to accord to areas an independent impact. Even discussion of 'neighbourhood effects' relate to the relative concentrations of people with particular characteristics and whether that can lead to 'tipping' effects. Moreover, there is the danger that focusing on areas rather than people can slip into a colour blind approach to issues and policy. While the authors are reasonably concerned not to attribute to 'ethnicity' (whatever that would mean) consequences that stem from poverty, if we stop paying attention to ethnicity at all in relation to distributions of disadvantage, then policy 'solutions' may leave marginalised groups behind. For example, we can see this concern in the comments of the recent National Audit Office report on increasing employment rates for ethnic minorities: moving to an area focus the report suggests has meant abandoning even some successful programmes which had a minority focus – and does not necessarily compensate for that loss. Focusing policy on areas may in fact divert resources away from the most disadvantaged people within areas.

Poverty

I welcomed the contribution of this paper in terms of its emphasis on poverty (and on diversity in that poverty). Poverty rates are both striking and, as the paper points out, can be associated with a range of other outcomes, either as a contributory factor (e.g. low birth weight, higher mortality) or as an effect (e.g. of lower pay and lack of access to the labour market). There is a lot we still do not know or understand about minorities poverty experience including the details of poverty distribution and duration and the role of such issues as take-up of benefit. The paper does well to prompt us to uncover in more detail the diversity of poverty experience across minority groups, both its causes, its features and its consequences. Moreover, a focus on poverty provides a means to consider disadvantage at a general level without ignoring unequal distributions across ethnic groups. For example, in my current research on child poverty and ethnicity I make the case that introducing a consideration of ethnicity into mainstream agendas, such as that on child poverty, provides an important means of giving weight to concerns with ethnic minority disadvantage and to recognising ethnicity within debates on disadvantage and within policy prescriptions without pathologising it or compartmentalising it for policy purposes.

2. Direct observations on the paper

In this second section I outline some concerns relating to some aspects of the coverage or terminology of the paper, or where I felt the discussion needed clarification. I outline the six main points where I thought some further thought, modification or resolution were needed.

First, 'harm'. Harm was initially introduced in the paper as experience of crimes, but then, in line with the overall intention of the paper was broadened out. This meant it was unclear what the criteria were for designating something a 'harm'. Additionally it was not clear if 'harm' was intended to reflect a process or an outcome – or both. It seemed to be used in both ways. Moreover, the identification of certain 'harms' left some doubt about whether they could always be considered harms or whether their designation as harms was context specific and was to do with minority group over-representation rather than the intrinsic nature of the processes involved.

Second, 'ethnic penalty' was used regularly in the paper, but again lacked precision. Is it being used, as I would expect, as a description of what we 'don't know' about differential outcomes, or is it being used to specify particular unjust conditions? Additionally, it seems to be used to indicate both causes of harms and the outcomes, the harms themselves.

Third, the paper starts with a consideration of young Black men and goes on to take in all minority ethnic groups and a range of very different outcomes or harms. I am, however, not convinced that it makes much sense to link the low birth weight child of a Pakistani born mother with the relatively harsh sentencing of a young Black Caribbean man. Both are important, but I'm not sure I grasped the connection, or that they can be accounted for in a similar framework.

Fourth, I was concerned by the invisibility of gender in this paper. It appeared to be perpetuating an ungendered consideration of ethnicity. A paper about (young) Black men is not about ethnic minority women. And even the focus on employment was highly gendered. Existing research has not only shed light on the ways that women are simultaneously seen as cultural containers, regarded as responsible for the misdeeds of their sons and yet not considered independently; but there are also considerations to be given to women in relation to their experience of specific harms, for example of violence against women. Similarly the discussion of under-attainment does not allow, for example, for concerns about Caribbean *girls'* levels of attainment relative to other groups of girls, and what might be done to improve them.

Fifth, I thought that there was a lack of attention paid to the experience of victims. The paper kicks off from a consideration of Black men as victims, but thereafter only considers their experience in the criminal justice system as perpetrators. The opening of the paper shows how locating responsibility for victimhood within the Black community can distance it and make it 'someone else's problem'. Surely there is a need to re-instate it as 'our problem'?

Finally, the claim that social mobility is decreasing is becoming treated as an accepted truth. However, it is neither an uncontested finding nor does it apply across ethnic groups. There is plenty of research which presents rather a different story for the population as a whole; and I was therefore concerned to see the decrease of social mobility simply being asserted here. Moreover, patterns of mobility are very different

when we look across ethnic groups. As my own research has shown, upward mobility is more common for most groups, though some groups do not seem to be able to achieve upward mobility in line with other groups or even with their levels of qualifications. The picture is therefore a mixed and a complex one. But it is not all negative.

3. Questions

In this third section of the response I briefly introduce some questions relating to the purpose and function of this paper, and therefore where it goes from here.

1. There are a range of different points made about the experience of ethnic minorities in this paper. Where do they lead? Is there an overarching story?
2. The paper starts from a criminal justice perspective. Is it, in the end, about the criminal justice system (and how we evaluate it) or is it simply using that as a point of departure to talk about wider experience? If so how are the boundaries of the discussion set?
3. A related point is: why these harms? Why not others such as (lack of) political representation?
4. The paper covers policy, discourse and delivery of services, and switches lightly from one to the other. These are very different domains. If it is seeking change, in which of these domains is its intervention primarily intended?
5. What is the role of discrimination in the outcomes outlined? Is the argument about 'race'? At one point the paper claims that 'race' is not what is at issue. But the rest of the paper tends to emphasise racial discrimination as an implied causal factor. Can this be sustained from the evidence? Is it the message that the paper intends to get across? And what are the implications if it is or isn't?
6. A related question is the extent to which the harms outlined are seen as intentional, perpetrated by particular agents. I was not clear where agency was located within the paper.
7. And what about under- as well as over-representation? In some cases minority groups are ill-served by lack of attention, and experience harms from neglect or lack of access (e.g. to services). But the paper concentrates on those areas where it is 'over-attention' that is the issue. What is the balance between recognition and adverse attention? Between invisibility and normalisation? Harms of commission rather than omission are the focus, but harms of omission can surely be just as important and deserve attention.
8. Finally, in relation to what the paper can conclude on the subject of harms, I wondered if there could be a way of weighing up harms. Whether it was possible to create some form of accounting method that would tell us about relative impact. For example, would it be possible to compare years of life lost (or 'wasted' and therefore effectively lost) through different sorts of harm?