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'Race', space and place

Examining identity and cultures of exclusion in rural England

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ABSTRACT Rural village communities in England are commonly portrayed as being neighbourly and close-knit, with villagers perceived as having a deep-seated sense of local identity complemented by strong feelings of belonging. This narrow view obscures, and marginalizes, the experiences of minority ethnic residents who can often feel excluded from village life. This article assesses whether the process of 'othering' that works to ostracize minority ethnic households is similar to that experienced by all 'outsiders' who are newcomers to rural living. It is argued that the conflation of rurality with notions of Englishness and 'whiteness' serves to reinforce this marginalization. Indeed, the scattered distribution of minority ethnic populations in the rural means that any understanding of these 'communities' needs to recognize that they are not 'communities of place' but instead are 'communities of shared risk', as it is the risk of racist harassment that provides commonality, kinship and shared experience amongst these diverse populations.

KEYWORDS community ● identity ● localism ● othering ● racist harassment ● rurality

INTRODUCTION

Rural issues in England have become increasingly newsworthy in recent years, due in no small part to the ongoing and emotive debate surrounding the future of hunting with hounds and the prominent pro-hunting campaigning of the Countryside Alliance pressure group. The Alliance has staged a number of high-profile demonstrations in London and elsewhere

against the rural policies of the British Labour government, including a large-scale (and mostly) peaceful demonstration in September 2001 and a smaller rally in September 2001, which descended into disorder and violence. Much of the Alliance's campaigning has been conducted under the banner of 'Liberty and Livelihood', as it feels that traditional rural ways of life are under threat, and that countryside concerns, including poor public transport networks, the closure of essential local rural services, such as schools and post offices, and a lack of leisure facilities, have been disregarded by an urbanite, left-of-centre governing 'elite' (Woods, 2004).

Interestingly, one rural issue that has been absent from the Countryside Alliance's campaigning is that of rural racist harassment and violence. It appears as if this problem has received little or no recognition at all from the group, and that the organizers of the demonstrations, themselves overwhelmingly white in composition, have no real comprehension of the difficulties experienced by sections of their own rural populations. This attitude may typify the common misapprehension highlighted by de Lima (2001) that racism is discounted as a problem in rural locations due to the comparative lack of minority ethnic households resident there. If there are low numbers of minority ethnic people, then, so the logic goes, there must be little or no racist harassment – a misguided logic that this article will attempt to deconstruct.

As will be outlined below, the idea that rural populations are homogenous and white is still potent in many rural communities in England. Drawing upon the small but growing body of work in this area, including research undertaken by the authors in four rural and isolated areas of England – Suffolk, East Northamptonshire, and north and south Warwickshire[1] – the article examines notions of rural English tradition, belonging and community and suggests that these can result in a process of exclusion of perceived 'outsiders' from many village communities. It will be noted that whilst this process of 'othering' is often applied to any village 'newcomer' who looks different or leads an alternative lifestyle, it is especially marked for those who look visibly different from the 'white norm', as the quotation below, taken from the authors' research, vividly illustrates:

> When I was working in a sales room . . . there was one bloke in his late 50s who had never been abroad in his life, very rarely went out of Lowestoft. He would get so excited if he saw a 'coloured' person. I remember one occasion where a black woman walked into the sales room and he shouted, 'Dave, Dave, look at that, you don't see many as black as that!' (White male, east Suffolk)

This type of 'shocked' reaction at seeing someone visibly different was not untypical of many of the anecdotes related to the authors during their studies. Therefore, this article will utilize the authors' findings in the light of a number of different explanations of 'community' in order to assess the nature of English rural village life and the experiences of minority ethnic

people within this context. It will suggest that conceptions of Englishness are still strongly associated with notions of the 'rural idyll', which itself is conflated with 'whiteness'. Although racism itself is not simply an inevitable or homogeneous experience that affects all rural minority ethnic households to the same extent or in the same way,[2] we will see that episodes of racist victimization are sadly not uncommon, and it is argued that developing an understanding of the nature of the risk of victimization may actually assist in the reconstruction of the perception of rural minority ethnic communities as 'communities of shared risk' that takes note of the scattered and vulnerable nature of such populations. Such a conceptualization may help to develop a fuller appreciation of the realities of rural living for those communities.

METHODOLOGY

The research material referred to in this article is drawn from three rural-based studies broadly similar in scope. The first of these was commissioned by Suffolk County Council and associated partner organizations to investigate the problem of racism in rural Suffolk. Specifically, the research was designed to assess the nature and extent of racial harassment suffered by minority ethnic families living in rural and isolated parts of the county and to examine agency responses to victims of such harassment.[3] A similar study was commissioned by Northamptonshire's Eastern Area Multi-Agency Group Against Racial Attacks and Harassment (MAGRAH) to undertake research into the effectiveness of services provided by local voluntary and statutory agencies for victims of racial harassment living in the borough of East Northamptonshire.[4] The third study, based in the districts of north Warwickshire and Stratford-on-Avon, was predominantly funded and supported by Warwickshire Constabulary, with other associated agencies also contributing to the project. This piece of research had similar aims and objectives to the Suffolk project.[5] Common to all three studies was a belief that such research would elicit further information about hitherto 'hidden' forms of victimization, thereby helping local agencies to provide fully informed and, where appropriate, improved levels of support.

The utilization of similar qualitative and quantitative methodological devices in each study helped to develop a broad base of original material from which detailed findings could be drawn. Of central importance were the total of 65 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with members of minority ethnic groups living in each area, which were undertaken as a way of gaining a deeper appreciation of the types of issues and problems confronting people from a minority background living in a rural environment. As a way of establishing a representative selection of

households with regard to their demographic profile, interviewees were chosen on the basis of recommendations from local agencies and through identification via questionnaire responses.[6] The households involved in each study were evenly distributed in terms of gender, and drawn from a broad cross-section of visible and non-visible minority ethnic communities, rural areas of residence and age groups.

Over 50 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with representatives from local statutory and voluntary agencies in all three areas. Accessing the perceptions of such a broad range of organizations was a valuable way of assessing levels of inter- and intra-agency working practice and of identifying gaps in support provision. A further feature of the methodology utilized in each study included the organization of focus groups and interviews with members of established white rural communities: this, it was anticipated, would help to contextualize minorities' own experiences of rural life by illustrating how members of minority ethnic groups are perceived in communities renowned for being somewhat resistant to change.[7]

Finally, in accordance with Bowling's (1993) suggestion that a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods can be the key to establishing a clear understanding of racist victimization, the methodology also included a postal questionnaire survey of minority ethnic groups living in all four areas. Essentially, this was designed to provide quantifiable back-up to the other methodological features, by gauging respondents' views on a range of issues relating to crime, community safety and racial harassment.[8]

REASSESSING VILLAGE LIFE: TRADITION, BELONGING AND LOCALISM

During the summer of 2004, *The Times* newspaper published a series of articles featuring local cricket clubs in a number of English village settings. Typical of these pieces was 'Shireshead Thriving in Rural Idyll', which described the location of northern village cricket team Shireshead's ground as being in '. . . an oasis of English charm. Think oak trees and cows surrounding a manicured field fringed by neat pavilion and scorebox' (Lee, 2004: 34). This portrayal of quintessential Englishness, typified by pastoral rural images of greenery and cricket, perpetuates a popular media and cultural myth of the cosy English village community, complete with its strong ties of kinship, shared values and sense of belonging (Neal, 2002; Chakraborti and Garland, 2004a). Complementing this myth is a view of villages as crime-free locales where there is a certain shared sense of identity complemented by strong feelings of belonging (Francis and

Henderson, 1992); ideas that are often reflected in traditional notions of community more generally (Bauman, 2001).

However, as Cloke (2004) and Bonnett (2000) (*inter alia*) have argued, these idealized notions of community fail to reflect the fragmented and complex nature of contemporary village life. As Cloke and Little (1997) suggest, rural communities are often more cautious, conservative and essentially 'circumspect' in nature than many residents like to admit, and incomers from the city, and indeed even those from neighbouring towns and villages, are viewed with distrust and suspicion. This point is vividly illustrated by the following two observations from a white senior police officer from south Warwickshire and a white male in north Warwickshire, expressed to the authors during the course of their research:

> These old, established communities – if you've come from the outside, like the next village, you're never regarded as an insider. That is the nub of the problem.

> Most of England, historically, has been suspicious of foreigners, and it also applies to people who are, you know, short-sighted, blonde, long-legged, all that sort of thing.

This form of 'localism', involving an inherent distrust of the 'other', was, according to the two interviewees above, reserved for all of those who are perceived to be different in some form. They argued that minority ethnic incomers to the village are treated no differently from others whose faces are not familiar. Therefore, whilst acknowledging the common marginalization of the 'other' in the rural, they suggested that any discrimination directed against those from different ethnic backgrounds was merely a symptom of this intense 'localism' and not racism per se: it was caused simply by the fact that 'outsiders' simply did not 'fit in' with the standard norms of the community.

Little (2002: 4), in his detailed study of the politics of community, indicates that the problem may be deeper than one of mere difference by suggesting that communities 'still command certain behaviour from members and indeed this may take the form of expectations of obligation, reciprocity and so on'. Therefore, anyone new to a tightly knit and small social network may take time to understand the patterns of local behaviour and particularistic rural customs, and will experience coercion to learn and abide by them. As Giddens (1994: 126) notes, rather than being open and tolerant, such traditional communities can be limiting and oppressive towards individualism whilst exerting a 'compelling pressure towards conformism' upon anyone perceived to be somehow different.

In the course of the authors' studies of rural racism in various regions, this intolerance has been vocalized by a number of those interviewed, and has certainly been evident in the testimony of both white and minority ethnic participants. However, as was suggested in the introduction to this article, the fact that someone may look visibly different appears to act as a

catalyst for forms of racism peculiar to environments where white communities are simply not familiar with, or used to, people with markedly different physical features, as the following research quotations demonstrate:

> In certain communities, people will actually stand and openly stare at people just because they've got a different skin colour. And I don't think that's in a particularly antagonistic way, I think it's just because people don't have an understanding because they're not exposed. (Senior police officer, south Warwickshire)

> I always think back to the very first, umm, ethnic girl that I had in a class, and no-one knew how to refer to her. They were sort of saying 'Well, it's, er, you know the one I mean: the little girl in the red cardigan. . . . (White female schoolteacher, north Warwickshire)

The discomfort when talking about minority ethnic people illustrated in the last quotation was evident in a number of the testimonies from white rural dwellers, whether agency representatives or 'ordinary' members of the public, when interviewed by the authors. Whether intentional or not, such behaviour reflects attitudes that have, in a broader context in England during the early part of the twenty-first century, manifested themselves most visibly in village campaigns against the Labour government's policy of dispersing asylum seekers into rural areas. As Bright (2004: 13) describes, these campaigns are often conducted amidst a 'climate of mistrust, fear and ignorance', in which rural residents believe that their 'cultural identity' will be eroded by the arrival of asylum seekers, the misunderstood 'alien other'.

This 'othering' of those who are visibly different takes place in a rural environment in which, as Saunders et al. (1978: 62) suggested over two decades ago, long-standing hierarchical social structures persist and consequently 'traditional forms of authority seem to ensue'. Such stratified social systems with their in-built hierarchies may have been in place for decades, if not centuries (Francis and Henderson, 1992) and are almost impenetrable to newcomers. If minority ethnic families try to get involved in aspects of village life, they may find themselves victims of this rigid system and unable to become part of traditional village activities. As Magne (2003: 5.17) found when investigating rural racism in Devon in south-west England, only around a third of her minority ethnic research participants were involved in community-related activities and less than half participated in community life in any way at all. Reasons given for this lack of participation included: fear of cultural and linguistic problems; cultural connotations that caused concern about participation in organizations; and exclusion by virtue of the fact that village life is intertwined with church life (Magne, 2003: 5.20).

The inherently exclusive nature of basing so much rural community

activity around the church (and most usually the Church of England) creates barriers that those from different religions find very difficult to penetrate. However, we have found that in some rural regions, such as north and south Warwickshire where there are very few minority ethnic households, such households did not seek to form their own religious or cultural organizations in their own geographical area. This may be, as one interviewee suggested, because of fear of adverse reaction from the white population:

> If we did all get together the white population might think, 'We have got a problem here, brown people getting together', and it probably wouldn't work in our favour. It might be a negative thing, they might try and beat us up. (Female interviewee of dual heritage, north Warwickshire)

Other 'traditional' social activities are also exclusionary. The 'customary' visit to the village pub, especially on a Sunday, also causes problems for those whose faith dictates that they should not drink alcohol. For some of those interviewed there was a reluctant acceptance that their local area offered them nothing in the way of cultural or religious amenities, as an Indian male interviewee in Northamptonshire admitted:

> The point I am trying to make is they [local minority ethnic communities] are accepting that there is nothing for us here, there will be nothing for us here. We might as well do our prayers here or jump in our cars and go elsewhere.

For some of those interviewed, the process of gaining acceptance into village life revolved around social status and issues relating to class. They felt that having a 'respectable' occupation, such as general practitioner, helped ease the process of integration into the community, as it reassured local residents of the person's professional and social credentials. As a District Councillor in south Warwickshire stated:

> The ethnic minorities we have got are well-educated professionals, therefore they're not perceived as spongers off the state or anything like that. They're really part of the community.

Thus if a minority ethnic villager conforms to the more established, and more 'customary', norms, values and expectations of rural society then they may find acceptance into village life more easily achievable. By having a professional employment status minority, ethnic people in wealthier rural settlements 'reassure' white residents that they are not 'scroungers' of state benefits, but instead are net economic contributors to the community. Their well-educated backgrounds also conform to middle-class notions of respectability and thus offer another route for acceptance, something that minority ethnic residents in lower-status occupations, or without a job at all, have additional difficulty with.

However, the 'process of acceptance' into rural communities for minority ethnic people is one of *assimilation*, rather than integration. Often, it

appears that white rural communities expect minority ethnic households to adopt the pre-existing (and essentially white English) cultural, social and religious norms that characterize village life, whatever the implications of this may be. If they do so, minority ethnic individuals can attain the status of an 'honorary white person', as the following quotation demonstrates:

> There's a chap who lives just down the road from me, he was saying, 'It's all right love, we don't see you as one of them. You're one of us.' I don't want to be one of you, thank you very much. I'm me, thank you. (Female interviewee of dual heritage, Mid-Suffolk)

This 'honorary' status, whether accepted or not, is temporary and ephemeral in nature and can be just as easily withdrawn in the same way that it is conferred upon the recipient (Back et al., 2001). It is more often than not based upon an idealized notion of rural identity centred within an 'imagined', rather than actual, formulation of rural community life (Anderson, 1991). As we shall see in the next section, this idealization of the rural neglects to acknowledge, whether by accident or design, the realities of racist harassment and abuse in the English countryside that undermine the traditional notions of rural village communities that appear so symbolically significant to many of their residents.

CULTURES OF RACISM AND EXCLUSION IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Nationally, the British Crime Survey has noted that, broadly speaking, those from minority ethnic populations suffer a higher risk of racist victimization than those from white backgrounds, with Pakistani/Bangladeshi communities being the most at risk (Clancy et al., 2001: 23). For minority ethnic populations more generally, their higher risk of racist victimization is reflected in perceptions of personal safety, with the British Home Office's *Citizenship Survey* for 2003 showing that white respondents feel safer in their local neighbourhoods when walking around after dark than those of any other ethnic group (aside from 'mixed race') (Home Office, 2004). Data contained within the same survey also indicate that those living in areas with the lowest density of minority ethnic households felt that there was currently 'more racial prejudice' than existed previously (p. 64), perhaps suggesting that predominantly white areas, such as many parts of the countryside, can experience worse 'race relations' than other, more ethnically diverse areas. Similarly, statistics for the years 2000–04 suggest that the most significant increases in the numbers of racist incidents occurred in the 'most sparsely populated areas, home to the smallest, most isolated minority communities' (Rayner, 2005: 1).

Therefore, the notion that some groups in the rural are more vulnerable to racist harassment than others is gaining currency, and indeed the authors themselves uncovered some accounts of the racist victimization of these 'at risk' groups during their research, as the examples below illustrate:

> A mate was going out with this black girl . . . and some kids started on him because he was with this black girl . . . they beat him up, he got a good old beating. (Member of white youth focus group, north Warwickshire)

> I've had fights in the public playing field when there's a football match going on, and all the dads turned round and watched five boys chanting names, throwing punches . . . I'm sure if I had been a little girl with blonde hair, there's no way they would have stood and watched a little girl with blonde hair having all these boys throwing punches, calling names, pulling hair, and all this kind of business. (Female interviewee of dual heritage, Mid-Suffolk)

The last of these accounts shows how some white rural residents turn a 'blind eye' to incidents occurring in front of them, whilst the first quotation is especially instructive in revealing the sometimes-brutal reaction to, and resentment of, dual heritage couples. Whilst it is not being suggested here that such types of racism are solely confined to the rural and are absent from the urban, it may well be the case that the 'localism' (and its in-built 'fear of the "other"') that strongly flavours the attitudes of white rural residents also fuels the overt racism described above and in the quotation below:[9]

> My son used to come home and say 'I don't want to go to school', and I would say 'Why?' and I found out they make fun of his hair. They say 'You haven't washed your hair' because it is black; 'You have got wolves on your legs' because they are hairy legs, so he would not do sports with shorts, he would wear long trousers. (Iranian female, north Warwickshire)

It has been suggested by some commentators (see for example Derounian, 1993) that the more hostile forms of rural racism may be located not in the sections of white communities who can trace their rural family lineage back centuries, but instead in the attitudes of new village residents – the so-called 'white flighters' – who have 'escaped' from the urban (with its perceived 'negatives' of crime and large minority ethnic populations) to what they view as the peaceful and ethnically homogenous countryside. These 'refugees from multiculturalism' (Jay, 1992: 22) are therefore both surprised by, and resentful of, the presence of minority ethnic residents in their villages, and it is these feelings that have been manipulated by the far-right British National Party (BNP) in its specifically rural 'Land and People' campaign, with its emphasis on the preservation of the essentially white nature of English rural communities.

However, the BNP's correlation of the countryside with English national identity is in itself resonant of wider ideas of Englishness, whose

formulation can be traced back to the 19th-century and the development of a new nationalism based upon 'the characteristics of landscape, and in the forms of a (rapidly vanishing) rural life' (Kumar, 2003: 209). In a society experiencing urbanization and industrialization at a bewildering pace, the rural was seen as the true heart of England, where the essence of national character had not been corrupted. The countryside's gently rolling hills, divided by meandering brooks and dotted with the spires of village churches, were often evoked, particularly at times of war, as the 'soul' of the English nation, which must be preserved at all costs (Colls, 2002). As Billig (1995: 71) suggests, if the history and self-image of a nation are constructed from a certain narrow view of both people and places, then it becomes very difficult for a number of minority groups to offer a different and more inclusive version of that nation:

> National histories tell of a people passing through time – 'our' people, with 'our' ways of life, and 'our' culture. Stereotypes of character and temperament can be mobilized to tell the tale of 'our' uniqueness and 'our' common fate . . . Different factions, whether classes, religions, regions, genders or ethnicities, always struggle for the power to speak for the nation, and to present their particular voice as the voice of the national whole. (Billig, 1995: 71)

This feeling of 'not fitting in' can lead to a sense of isolation, something that Magne (2003) found was exacerbated by difficulties in forming cross-cultural friendships and a lack of contact with other co-ethnic people. This sense of isolation, coupled with the harmful effects of the racist harassment described in this article, caused some of those interviewed to feel as if they existed 'apart' and excluded from the village life around them. As Johnston (2000: 77) suggests, this may be part of the way that some communities define themselves, by finding 'suitable enemies' against whom they can rally. In the case of rural villages, often the most easily identifiable scapegoat is the 'outsider', and especially the person who looks so obviously different from everyone else. The villager who is seen to threaten the essentially (white) character of the community will be the one who is excluded by those who feel challenged by their presence.

IMPLICATIONS: RECONFIGURING NOTIONS OF RURAL MINORITY ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

This article has examined the nature of rural communities and, in particular, the relationship between such communities and their minority ethnic inhabitants. It has been suggested that these communities – so often portrayed as warm, convivial and friendly – can in fact be insular and conservative in nature, and suspicious towards those deemed 'outsiders'. For community 'insiders', rural villages can be places where kinship and

shared identities can be played out and enjoyed; for those subject to the 'othering' process, such places can be cold and unwelcoming.

We have also seen that 'othering' can take a variety of forms and can affect minority ethnic households in different ways. Far from being a homogeneous experience, the othering process can differ widely in terms of its nature, extent and impact, depending on a range of factors, such as, for instance, the victim's ethnicity or professional status, or the type of rural space involved. Whilst not a focal point of the present article (and for a more detailed examination of the *heterogeneity*, as opposed to the *homogeneity*, of the othering process, see Chakraborti and Garland, 2004c), the sheer diversity of this process in terms of how it can operate differently at times, depending on the particular minority group, the particular region and the particular kind of village, should not be understated.

Similarly, and fairly self-evidently, it is clear that not every minority ethnic individual living in an English rural town and village will be a victim of racial harassment. Indeed, the authors' research revealed that some households, albeit a small minority, felt that they had not encountered any forms of racial prejudice. As discussed above, this was particularly applicable to those perceived to be from a relatively higher social class or from a more affluent background, whose position in rural society was deemed more secure by virtue of the fact that they were seen to be actively contributing to (as opposed to 'sponging from') their community. It is acknowledged that the term 'victim' is not always an appropriate one to use when referring to the lived experiences of minority ethnic groups, not least because it tends to perpetuate an imagery of inevitability about the process of racism and helplessness and passivity on the part of the recipient. This is clearly not the case and, as a number of researchers have found in their own studies of victimization, many recipients of abuse or harassment have been loath to refer to themselves as 'victims' (see, for example, Bowling and Phillips, 2002; Garland and Chakraborti, 2002; Goodey, 2005). However, in the context of the present article, which refers to households who have been victimized, many quite seriously, the term has been used deliberately to highlight the oft-found sense of powerlessness pervading minority ethnic relations with the wider rural community, and the broad, often unacknowledged, forms that victimization can take.

It was argued earlier that the othering process can appear, at least at face value, to be the same for those from white English backgrounds as it is for visible minority ethnic groups. Those immigrants from neighbouring towns and villages, whatever their ethnicity, can feel isolated and excluded from traditional village life due to the intense localist sentiments of many village inhabitants. As Etzioni (1997) states, such communities can be stiflingly conformist to 'traditional' cultures of behaviour and can in fact be intolerant towards difference and change.

The presence of visibly different minority ethnic households within

English villages is undoubtedly a challenge to the norms of the rural idyll. It has been illustrated above that hostility towards, or just unfamiliarity with, minority ethnic villagers can manifest itself in verbal abuse or even physical violence. Whether intentionally harmful or not, the attitudes behind sentiments such as those espoused by the 'You don't see many as black as that' east Suffolk car trader referred to in the introduction to the article can cause hurt and pain, and can lead victims to withdraw from everyday community life.

Whether this 'othering process' experienced by minority ethnic individuals and families in rural areas is in any way similar to the 'othering' process that can happen to 'outsider' white people is debatable. It has been argued that, whilst there are some similarities between the two (in that the 'fear of the unknown' may underpin them both), there are key differences too. The racist harassment experienced by minority ethnic people takes specific forms, both verbal and physical, that separate it from the 'othering' of white newcomers to the village. Whilst indigenous villagers may be wary of all incomers, the type of vitriolic abuse directed at minority ethnic groups detailed above is rarely inflicted upon new white English residents.

A worrying aspect of English rural village communities mentioned above is the tendency of some white residents to expect minority ethnic groups to assimilate into village life, complete with its traditional, specifically rural, and therefore quintessentially white, English customs and practices. Many of these customs and practices are championed by the Countryside Alliance pressure group, which feels that traditional rural pursuits are being threatened, and some (like foxhunting) criminalized by a government that does not care to understand the 'ways of the country'. Yet these pursuits are embedded in a notion of the countryside that is seen as the true embodiment of English values and beliefs. It is therefore easier for white English newcomers to be accepted into village communities, although it may take some years. However, there are certain barriers – cultural, religious, linguistic, social – that are ever present for minority ethnic people and are thus extremely difficult to overcome, even over a period of years. This can result in a sense of isolation and exclusion from local (white) communities, which is exacerbated by the lack of presence of other minority ethnic people nearby and by the pernicious effects of racism.

This picture is complicated further by issues of class and especially of white middle-class expectations and values. In the more affluent villages, such as those in south Warwickshire studied by the authors, those from minority ethnic backgrounds who pursued professional 'middle-class' career paths were more readily accepted into white village communities than those who did not. An air of respectability was seen as being an asset for those in such occupations, something that gave them a 'head start' when it came to breaking down barriers with some of their wealthier villagers.

However, as Saunders et al. (1978: 78) suggest, the picture may be more

complex still. Saunders et al. argue that notions of community are promoted and asserted by dominant political and social groups and echoed by 'subordinate groups', thus promoting a form of 'cross-class solidarity' that can reinforce localist sentiments and thus can work to promote feelings of resentment towards *all* outsiders.

There are other, broader aspects of English rural communities that are worth addressing. In their study of rural social housing, Bevan et al. (2001) found that many of the participants in their research were not particularly interested in fitting in with village community life, but instead focused on their own social networks, such as family or friends, that may be geographically dispersed. This raises an important issue of whether the examination of the nature of rural communities needs to be based less around traditional, geographical notions and should instead be conceived in more abstract, non-spatial terms.

As Young (2001: 38) suggests, the characteristics of late modern communities are that they are pluralistic, fragmented, transient and constantly reinventing their history and boundaries. Although Young may have been referring to the urban, rural communities will also be subject to the same stresses and strains of late modernity. Whilst they may not be as pluralistic or as fragmented as their city counterparts, rural communities are nevertheless less stable and have more transient populations than may be commonly perceived.

It is important to recall at this point that research into victim satisfaction with the services provided to them by relevant rural agencies, such as the police or local authorities, has shown that victims are often dissatisfied, and indeed sometimes upset, by the way that agencies deal with their cases (Garland and Chakraborti, 2004). This can be due to a number of factors, including victims feeling that agencies do not take their problems seriously; that police officers can be insensitive or indeed sometimes even hostile towards them; that agencies do not understand victims' needs; that agencies can often lack the expertise, knowledge and procedures to deal with racist incidents; and that cases of racist harassment are not prioritized within organizations. As Pugh (2004: 178) pertinently asserts, 'challenging and responding to racism is not a matter of professional or personal discretion, it is a statutory duty and a professional obligation', and certainly in the context of the authors' research, a number of agency workers demonstrated a deep commitment to providing greater support to victims; indeed, the fact that the authors' studies have been instigated and commissioned by agencies in itself shows a commendable degree of recognition for the problem of rural racism and a desire to improve existing levels of service provision on the part of the commissioning bodies. However, the serious flaws identified within both inter- and intra-agency working practice in each area of study highlighted that other service providers often failed to share the concerns and commitment of those commissioning bodies.[10]

This provision of appropriate services to victims of racist harassment can suffer because many agencies simply do not feel that allocating scarce human and financial resources towards small rural minority ethnic populations should be a policy priority. It appears as though they simplistically assume that if there are no substantial minority ethnic communities in rural localities, there can be no substantial problem of racism. For those agencies that are dealing with issues of rural 'community safety', it seems that if rural minority ethnic communities are not evident in the way that they define and view 'communities' (i.e. simply as large numbers of easily identifiable, homogenous people living in close geographical proximity), then their concerns need not be prioritized, thereby missing, or inadvertently disregarding, minority ethnic groups that need assistance, but whose presence in the countryside is scattered and sporadic (see Hughes, 2004: 9 for a succinct and perceptive analysis of the dangers of basing policy upon 'simple, or "primitive", notions of community').

Indeed, the term 'minority ethnic community' may be something of a misnomer in a rural context, as the research has pointed to the existence of essentially scattered, isolated households who lack peer group support and the types of networks that tend to be associated with the formation and sustenance of such a community. Instead, what we have now in England are relatively small (though growing) rural minority ethnic populations characterized by diversity and heterogeneity in terms of their ethnic, cultural and religious identities, their professional and economic status, and their capacity to engage with the norms and customs of their wider rural community. What links them together, though, is their susceptibility to racist victimization. While racism is by no means an 'inevitability' for the rural minority ethnic household, each of the authors' research studies has shown that both the fear and the experience of racism are persistent problems for the vast majority of such households that can have serious physical, emotional and financial implications.

Clearly, then, it is important to move away from geographically based notions of community and towards those that examine the issue from other angles. A useful definition in this regard is that provided by Etzioni (2000: 9, quoted in Little, 2002: 156), who suggests that:

> A community is a group of people who share criss-crossing affective bonds and a moral culture. By asserting this definition, I mean to indicate clearly that communities need not be local and are distinct from mere interest groups, in that they address a broad band of human needs. People who band together to gain privileged treatment for office equipment make an interest group; those who share a history, identity and fate, a community.

Etzioni therefore proposes that scattered populations can nevertheless form communities if they have certain cultural or historical ties that bond them together, an idea echoed by Kelly, who suggests that for all types of

community, 'the prime defining feature is that the members believe themselves to be linked to the other members' (2003: 41). Whilst different minority ethnic groups do share these bonds (at least within each group), an added factor that may help in the formulation of this conceptualization of community is that of risk. For instance, a factor that underscores the lives of all of the diverse minority ethnic populations in English rural areas is that they are at risk 'on a daily basis' of experiencing racist harassment (Taylor, 2003: 232). Johnston (2000) argues that populations should be thought of in terms of the risk that they face of becoming victims of crime, meaning that one could have 'high' or 'low' risk communities, or those of 'shared risk', who face a common problem collectively. In the case of rural minority ethnic groups at risk of racist victimization, they could be conceived of as communities of 'shared risk'; a concept that bypasses the need for such populations to live in the same shared space and that can be used as a tool to encourage rural support agencies to identify minority ethnic groups and their problems. Without this focus on 'numbers and geography', but with the added emphasis on risk, this alternative definition of rural minority ethnic communities may help to raise their profile in the English countryside where previously they were often all but invisible. These communities may then receive the recognition that their situation deserves.

Notes

1 For more specific and detailed findings from these studies, see Garland and Chakraborti, 2002; Chakraborti et al., 2003 and Chakraborti and Garland, 2004b.

2 For a more detailed discussion of the variations in perception and experience amongst different rural minority ethnic groups (and in particular of the way in which being visibly different can be seen by some as a positive, as opposed to negative, feature of rural life), see Chakraborti and Garland, 2004c and Robinson and Gardner, 2004.

3 The Suffolk-based research was conducted primarily in the county's designated rural priority area, which, according to available UK Census figures, has a total minority ethnic population of 3,275 (3.0 per cent of the overall population in that area). The largest minority ethnic groups in this area are black (including black African, black Caribbean and black other, 1.1 per cent), Irish (0.8 per cent) and south Asian (including Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi, 0.2 per cent).

4 The second study was based predominantly in East Northamptonshire, which has a minority ethnic population of 1,332 (less than 2.0 per cent of that borough's total population) according to the latest UK Census figures. The largest minority ethnic groups there are dual heritage (0.7 per cent), followed by Asian (0.4 per cent), while black and Chinese groups each account for approximately 0.3 per cent of the population.

5 The third project was conducted in the districts of north Warwickshire and Stratford-on-Avon. The largest minority ethnic groups within north Warwickshire are drawn from the Irish and other white groups, accounting for 0.8 per cent (488 people) and 0.7 per cent (429) of the total population respectively. Other groups with a significant presence in the district include Indians who make up a further 0.4 per cent (236) and people of dual heritage (0.5 per cent; 320). In Stratford-on-Avon, 4,476 people (4.0 per cent) are from a minority ethnic background, including 'White Other' and Irish groups (2,036 (1.8 per cent) and 978 (0.9 per cent)), 548 (0.5 per cent) people of dual heritage, 282 (0.3 per cent) Indians and 196 (0.2 per cent) Chinese.
6 All of the potential interviewees contacted by the research team in each county expressed their willingness to take part.
7 Due to lack of space, the findings from this aspect of the research are not detailed here, but instead can be found in the publications referred to in note 1.
8 As the focus of this article is on the qualitative aspects of the research, and with considerations of space in mind, the findings from the surveys will not be assessed here, but instead can be found in Garland and Chakraborti, 2002 and Chakraborti and Garland, 2003, 2004b.
9 See Ray et al., 2004 for a fascinating (and in some ways contrasting) analysis of the motivations of violent racist offenders in outlying areas to the north and west of Manchester city centre.
10 A more detailed examination of agency responses to victimization in each of the rural environments studied by the authors can be found in Garland and Chakraborti, 2004. For a more general overview of the key issues and challenges facing rural-based agencies when responding to rural racism, see Pugh, 2004.

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