

Minorities within minorities: beneath the surface of community participation

Participation is on everyone's agenda at the moment, and statutory agencies are conscious of the need to hear a wide range of voices. Some voices, however, are more powerful than others. This research project carried out in Bradford supports the view that statutory agencies do not adequately hear minority voices within groups such as the South Asian community. Academics from Bradford University supported four community members to research participation issues in their communities, focusing on culture and place of origin, sexuality, mental health and disability. The research found that:

- Bradford's South Asian community is culturally and socially fragmented, reflecting caste, gender and generational hierarchies deriving from place of origin. These hierarchies often impacted significantly on participation and on which voices were heard.
- Minorities within the South Asian minority can face high levels of stigma from their own communities, as well as the wider population. This is particularly so for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, but also applies, for example, to those with mental health problems.
- Statutory organisations, while hearing from South Asians and from minority identity groups amongst those of non-Asian heritage, generally do not hear from South Asian minority groups, and may inadvertently reinforce social structures that impede these minorities. Where this is not the case, services rarely have the capacity to maintain appropriate provision.
- Mosques play a key role in participation, giving statutory organisations the opportunity to work with Bradford's South Asian community. However, those who did not find the mosque enabling (for example, some women, the LGBT community, those from lower caste backgrounds) might not be heard.
- Some within statutory organisations assume that people could contribute to neighbourhood-level consultation, regardless of minority status. In predominantly South Asian neighbourhoods, the research did not bear this out – some minorities face significant obstacles to participation at the neighbourhood level.
- Committed individuals within statutory organisations face resource, capacity and leadership barriers, limiting their ability to address the needs of minorities within minorities.
- Community organisations catering sensitively for particular identity groups are crucial for supporting them and acting as channels for their views.
- The study concludes that if statutory organisations are to help excluded minorities within the South Asian community, they need to support, resource and work in partnership with these community organisations. There is also considerable potential for involving community organisations in using research to push for change.



Background

Public bodies, including local authorities, the NHS and the police, have a duty to involve the communities they serve in decisions about service provision. Efforts are made to hear from different communities, but where these are sizeable, such as the South Asian community in Bradford, minority voices can easily go unheard. 'Minorities within minorities', who share experiences or identities that might make them vulnerable or less able to make their voices heard, may have different needs to the majority population in terms of services, or may find it more difficult to participate in formal spaces. Minority identities might relate to sexuality, mental health, disability, gender, generation and socio-cultural origins (for example, 'caste', class, or whether they are from Bradford's majority Mirpuri community).

The need for this research was articulated by Bradford's Communities of Interest Working Group, comprising representatives from the police, the NHS, Bradford Council and the voluntary sector. The study explored the barriers to participation facing particular identity groups, chosen on a case-study basis, within the South Asian community in Bradford. The interviewees came from a broad range of social and religious backgrounds and identities.

The issues raised by this project are complex and difficult. There are no easy answers as to how statutory agencies can effectively involve marginalised and vulnerable groups in mainstream structures of participation and representation, or address the community power dynamics and conflicting values that suppress such voices. As such, the research was not intended to judge or censure particular agencies or approaches. While this project had a specific focus on Bradford's South Asian community, the issues are relevant to identity and participation in other contexts where substantial minorities exist.

Existing opportunities for participation in Bradford

Overall, there is a sense that statutory organisations in Bradford are predominantly hearing from articulate, educated, professional South Asians through consultation processes, and from equally narrow but different minority groups, often influenced by caste, class and place of origin, through more formal representation processes. Statutory organisations also hear from generic organisations for communities of interest and identity groups, such as the LGB Strategic Partnership (representing lesbian, gay and bisexual people), but South Asians are often unable to use these 'identity based' routes to participation. As a result, many South Asian minority voices remain unheard.

Within statutory organisations, individuals responsible for inviting or supporting participation displayed, almost without exception, immense personal dedication and commitment to involving and supporting as wide a range of people as possible in meaningful, relevant ways. However, they face challenges from within their own organisations, including capacity and the leadership necessary to tackle difficult issues.

Existing mechanisms for participation are heavily focused on neighbourhoods rather than on communities of interest. Some within statutory organisations hold the view that individuals' minority identity should not deter them from contributing to neighbourhood-level planning or consultation. However, the study findings suggested that there are significant reasons why many people within the close-knit but fragmented South Asian community are deterred from getting involved with neighbourhood-level politics and helping to change attitudes within the community.

Culture and place of origin

The study found the South Asian community in Bradford, though strong bonds exist within it, to be fragmented according to place of origin, exacerbated by the rural/urban divisions on the Asian sub-continent. In turn, this fragmentation is intensified by different levels of education. These dynamics impact differently on men and women, and on the younger and older generations, as a result of social norms and expectations. Caste division is also severely limiting in terms of social mobility; judgements on the basis of caste are still being made by some young people born in the UK. Caste and status influences mosque leadership, with the mosque being a key locale for participation within the South Asian community. Caste also influences the character of political representation of areas such as Manningham, where residents from one area of Pakistan predominate.

Formal forums set up by statutory organisations to engage the South Asian community, such as the Minorities Police Liaison Committee, often do not recognise these underlying complexities, and can inadvertently reproduce such exclusion from representation. Furthermore, the study suggests that attracting a wider range of participants, would not be enough in itself. Existing participants and public officials would need to be prepared to listen to the new perspectives of these new participants. There would also be a role for statutory organisations, working in partnership with voluntary and community sector organisations, in supporting these 'minority' voices to speak confidently and honestly in what would most likely be a daunting environment.

Sexuality

The South Asian LGBT community in Bradford faces religious and cultural intolerance, which is expressed as religious and family disapproval, social isolation, stigma and even violence. This has a major impact on the ability of people from this community to get involved in local consultation and decision-making.

The centrality of the mosque to community activities and participation is problematic for this group, in the context of religious condemnation. In addition, the close nature of Bradford's South Asian communities can be experienced as a form of surveillance, limiting people's freedom to act as they wished. These dense social relations, alongside religious and cultural judgements about sexuality, often discourage people from the South Asian LGBT community from getting involved in wider community activities.

As a result, organised participation by this community tends to take the form of mutual solidarity and support, rather than engaging with statutory organisations. The Asian and Black Communities (ABC) LGBT group in Bradford provides a much needed and valued space for this community, drawing participants from South Asian communities beyond Bradford. However, a particular concern was that lesbian and bisexual women are reluctant to attend even this group. In terms of more formal forums for participation, the interviewees shared a general sense that there was institutional indifference to the needs of this community.

Mental health

Those with experience of mental health difficulties also needed a supportive approach to participation. This could involve preparation before attending a community planning or consultation event, and providing support for people to think through the issues and work out what they want to contribute. For most people, this would be best addressed through a community based, informal forum. Sharing Voices Bradford, where one of the community researchers was based, is a good example of this kind of organisation. Its members value the support, community, respect and understanding it offers.

Disability

South Asian disabled people do not necessarily view themselves as a 'community of interest'; they mostly preferred to identify with their ethnic or religious community. Accordingly, in most cases they simply wished to maximise their opportunities to participate as much as any other citizen. However, it is the case that disabled people experience additional practical barriers to participation, in terms of transport, access, support and communication.

There was a high level of frustration amongst respondents in this area of the study with research that does not lead to action or change. Accordingly, there is great potential for involving individuals and communities, through community organisations and networks, in using research to push for change.

Conclusion

The study found participation among the Bradford South Asian community to be dominated by a minority within the largest section of that community. Statutory organisations are increasingly trying to hear from communities of interest, such as the LGBT community or disabled people. While this is clearly important, and very welcome, statutory organisations are not yet giving sufficient attention to representativeness or diversity within those communities of interest, which tend to comprise white people in the main. This situation impacts on those who are most vulnerable. Those who are least likely to be able to contribute their views are also most likely to have needs that differ from the majority population, and are therefore most in need of statutory organisations to hear and address their particular requirements.

The study found many individuals within statutory organisations who are working hard to understand the needs and dynamics of the communities they serve. However, they are constrained by organisational factors. These include a risk-averse culture that shies away from addressing difficult questions about the tensions within and across communities, which prevent some people or groups from contributing openly and easily to local planning and consultation.

There are strong supportive networks within communities who work to support less powerful and more vulnerable minority groups. The importance of these organisations to their members was abundantly clear. However, if statutory organisations want such organisations to play a role in supporting and developing participation, they need to support, resource and work with them towards this goal. The key message from the research is the need for statutory organisations to work sensitively, supportively and in genuine partnership with community networks and organisations, to ensure that 'minorities within minorities' have a voice and are heard.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are aimed at statutory bodies in Bradford, but they have relevance nationally in all contexts where substantial minority communities exist. Statutory bodies need to:

- Avoid assuming that a minority ethnic group or community is homogeneous. It is important to **understand the group or community's social structures** and power relationships before designing mechanisms for participation.
- Be clear on the **issue of representation** and who is speaking for whom. Who and what makes a good representative of a community or community of interest group? Discuss this with representatives rather than assume that they know what their role is.
- **Support individuals open to change within minority communities** to organise, debate and challenge – both within their own communities and as honest, forthright advocates within the participatory forums created by statutory organisations. At the same time, agents for change can be encouraged to work with those who may be perceived as 'gatekeepers,' such as local imams or elders.
- **Help and prepare new voices** to take part in participatory forums, for example through training programmes.
- When addressing the needs of communities of interest within ethnic minorities, **do not assume that they will have the same needs as minorities within majority communities**.
- Build **serious, supportive partnerships with voluntary sector organisations** that genuinely represent communities of interest within minority communities, in order to:
 - encourage new forms of grassroots leadership that empower the wider community;

- create supportive forums for communities to come together outside statutory services, so that previously excluded groups can build their confidence and capacity to prepare for and participate in formal meetings;
- allow community workers to act as a channel for people's views, where access is otherwise limited;
- foster a two-way dialogue, so that statutory organisations can also learn from minority communities.

About the project

A methodology of participatory community research was chosen as the most appropriate way to gather often sensitive knowledge and experience from within the minority communities concerned. This ensured that members of those communities felt some ownership of the research process and would thus be more inclined to make use of the findings. It also placed a clear and public value on the knowledge existing within communities. The academic mentors appreciated the greater depth of understanding and insight gained from this research method than if they had carried out the research themselves.

A team of seven academics worked alongside four community researchers. The community researchers carried out participant observation within their own networks and communities, in the areas of cultures and place of origin, sexuality, mental health and disability. These observations were supplemented by a total of 28 interviews, which covered a broad range of social backgrounds and identities. The community researchers also acted as key informants for the study, and were themselves interviewed by their academic mentors. In addition, the project co-ordinator carried out 11 interviews in a review of existing structures for participation within statutory organisations in Bradford.

For further information

The full report, **Minorities within minorities: Beneath the surface of South Asian participation** by Heather Blakey, Jenny Pearce and Graeme Chesters, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk.

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