

Methodology of the Community Studies

The aim of this series is to start a dialogue on the changing nature of ethnic diversity in Britain. It is becoming increasingly clear that we need to move beyond binary notions of white and non-white to explain the ways in which racisms operate, identities are formed and people live out their lives. A clear understanding of the experiences of different groups and individuals, how they interact amongst themselves and with others, and how they see their place in Britain are all vital components of an effective and constructive policy on social cohesion. This is what Runnymede wants to achieve through this series.

For this reason, we have embarked on the task of exploring Britain's less visible communities, the changing dynamics of place and day-to-day living, and the various ways in which people socialise and form bonds. As the subject matter of the studies is the current development of diversity in Britain, statistics and academic literature tend to be scarce at the outset of each study. Indeed, it is exactly this information deficit that we want to address by initiating a dialogue. The aim is not to present a comprehensive picture of each community, but rather to identify and map out the main issues relevant to them. For this reason, as well as the small scale of each study, the methodology used for our community studies is principally qualitative. Adopting a purposive sampling technique – where interviewees are selected specifically a) for their specific experiences or knowledge, and b) to capture the diversity and breadth of views within the sample group – allows us to speak to key information holders such as individuals directly involved with community organisations, as well as ordinary people getting on with their everyday lives. By adopting a unified methodology throughout the different studies, we hope to identify key themes of particular importance to the communities under study, and give us the tools to compare them.

It must be noted that we do not purport to represent conclusive ethnographic descriptions of the communities we study. While the purpose of our studies is to map out main issues identified by the participants of the studies, this can only amount to a 'snapshot' of the communities we study. It must also be stressed that not every issue of importance can be identified or discussed in the reports. It will be up to later studies to fill in the ethnographical details for a comprehensive understanding of the communities in question.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data is collected primarily through in-depth interviews and focus groups with key informants. Interviews are semi-structured, meaning that there is a set of issues to be explored with the interviewees. The questions asked are open-ended in style to encourage a fulsome response. However, the conversations are steered in certain directions according to the themes that need to be discussed with all interviewees. Where possible, we record the interviews, which are then transcribed and analysed in order to draw out key themes, concepts and emergent categories.

We supplement the primary data collected through in-depth interviews with various secondary data sources. Where appropriate, we use online qualitative questionnaires. The principal purpose of these questionnaires is to provide us with 'triangulation' data, i.e. material to help confirm, improve, or add an extra dimension to the clarity of research findings. Also, the researchers for each study visit and involve themselves in various community events and cultural exhibitions, in order to acquire an 'on the ground' understanding of social relations within the communities.

Roundtable Discussions

At the end of each study, we invite representatives from community organisations, policy makers, local authority representatives, and community media to discuss a working paper. The aim of the roundtables is twofold: 1) to democratise the research process by inviting participants of each study to comment on its findings prior to the publication of final reports; 2) to encourage local authorities and policy makers to engage with the 'hidden' communities and discuss forward looking strategies. Thus, the roundtables generate a dynamic discussion, not only on the contents of each paper, but also what conclusions can be drawn, and what lessons can be learned.

Dissemination

In the final stage of the process, we work closely with those who have taken part in the research as well as the participants of the roundtable discussions to disseminate the final reports to the relevant audience. Apart from posting the reports on our website, we also ask community organisations to post a link to the reports on their websites and distribute amongst their community members, and we make sure that the reports reach the attention of relevant authorities and policy makers. The small scale of the studies means that inaccuracies are unavoidable, but as the purpose of the studies is to create a dialogue, our dissemination practices are intended as a starting point for discussion.