

# 1

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## Introduction: the process of research

The ethnographic data presented in this book are arranged in the form of an argument that might be called theoretical. But my involvement and interest in the research were driven by personal motives. After twelve years of study and work as an Africanist anthropologist, I was faced with the choice between a teaching job in New York and another at Brunel, The University of West London. To stay in Britain would make sense, I thought, if I could engage in research among so-called immigrants. Having myself migrated to Britain at the age of twenty-one, I had been puzzled for a long time by the way in which immigrants were portrayed in the British media, in political rhetoric, and, not least, in the academic literature. Among Africanist anthropologists, it had become a commonplace that it was wrong to 'tribalize' people. It was wrong both politically and academically to say that what Africans did, they did *because* they were Maasai or Kikuyu, Luo or some other ethnic group. 'An African miner is a miner' was a neat phrase that, lifted from the work of Max Gluckman, served as a slogan against reducing people's culture to their tribal or ethnic identity. Yet, in Britain this ethnic reductionism seemed to reign supreme, and the greater number even of academic community studies I read seemed to echo it. Whatever any 'Asian' informant was reported to have said or done was interpreted with stunning regularity as a consequence of their 'Asianness', their 'ethnic identity', or the 'culture' of their 'community'. All agency seemed to be absent, and culture an imprisoning cocoon or a determining force. Even their children, born, raised, and educated in Britain, appeared in print as 'second-generation immigrants' or 'second-generation Asians', and, unlike the children of white migrants like me, were thought to be precariously suspended 'between two cultures'.

2 *Contesting culture*

This latter commonplace in particular I failed to understand. I could not work out why they should be suspended between, rather than be seen to reach across, two cultures. More importantly, which two cultures were involved? Was there a homogeneous British culture on the one hand, perhaps regardless of class or of region, and on the other hand some other culture, perhaps one which was shared with their parents? If so, how were these parental cultures defined: was it on the basis of regional origin or religion, caste or language, migratory path or nationality? Each of these could define a community, a culture, and an ethnic identity in the same breath, it seemed. So between which two cultures was any young Southallian suspended?

The answers to my confusion could, I thought, be found only by fieldwork: I rented a house in the centre of Southall, where I lived for the next six years, and from there involved myself in the life of the suburb. My agenda, as in all fieldwork, was open: live locally, socialize locally, find local things to do, and let yourself in for whatever comes. At the same time, keep a daily research diary, write fieldwork notes, and, not least, keep a personal diary in order not to confuse private concerns with the documentation of other people's doings and sayings. I first focused my research on youths in their teens for several reasons. All these young people had been born in the town, went to the same three schools, watched the same four television channels, and spoke the same language, a West London dialect of English interspersed with various Americanisms and Indianisms. Their shared circumstances of upbringing would allow me to abstain from tribalizing them: 'a Southallian Sikh is a Southallian', and whether or not I had to refer to their 'Sikhness' or their caste to understand what they did would be a matter of finding out, rather than knowing in advance. Their shared language would allow me to start fieldwork before attending classes in Hindi, Punjabi, or Urdu.

During the first year of living in Southall, I made myself known, and useful as far as I could. What I could draw on, and drew on with great personal pleasure, were my interests as a musician; what skills I had acquired in teaching creative writing; my ability to take minutes at meetings and deal with bureaucracies; and, most importantly, my personal desire to make friends and enjoy life to the full in a new place. Fieldwork and the curiosity for local knowledge began to imprint their own stamp on my daily routines. Gradually, the 'Railway Tavern' turned into a living-room away from home, and the grotty living-room of my house into a place where Narinder and Balbir, Joshua, Sukhbir, and Syd would drop in to have an illicit cigarette after school or a drink after work.

‘What do you actually do here? I mean, what’s this research thing you do for the College?’, Narinder once asked me during a get-together with his friends. By then, the first phase of research had become full-time: the Leverhulme Trust, London, had awarded me a grant which effectively relieved me from teaching duties for fifteen months. My project had a neat title now, which I explained to Narinder and his friends. ‘Cross-Community Peer Orientations in the Youth Culture of a Multi-Ethnic Suburb of London’ had become the focus of my research. That Southall was a multi-ethnic suburb of the capital was clear. That peer orientations concerned the mutual influences, cross-overs, and cultural fusions among young Southallians, was easily confirmed. But what was this ‘cross-community’ bit? The core of what I had promised the Leverhulme Trust to clarify was deconstructed by a few young Southallians that afternoon.

‘It depends what community you mean’, was their collective verdict on my research. When the cross-community orientation concerned music, clearly there was Rap, a music of the *Black community* eagerly taken up by the *Asians*. Conversely, there was Bhangra, the Punjabi dance turned disco-music which was performed best, at a recent prize contest, by a *Caribbean* kid who combined it with body-popping and breakdancing. When the cross-community orientation concerned the two notorious gangs that sometimes clashed on Southall’s streets and terrified local shopkeepers, the division was between young Sikhs of the Jat or farmers’ caste and, probably, everybody else, including ‘a few Blacks and whites that got themselves involved’. When it came to ‘going out’, cross-community would be the right word to describe a young *Asian* flirting with a young *Caribbean* or *white*, or it might apply to a young Sikh flirting with a young Hindu, or indeed a Sikh of East African Asian parentage flirting with a fellow Sikh of Punjabi parentage. Then again, some parents would not consider such a match to go across *community* boundaries since both were Sikh. ‘It’d also depend on how many daughters you’ve got, whether people call it “cross-community” to your face.’ If a household had four daughters to provide a dowry for, people would not gossip, I was told, if one of the daughters were to marry across one *community* boundary or another. But if you had four sons to bring in dowry, your only daughter would have to be ‘married off ever-so-pure’.

‘So what counts as “cross-community” depends on all sorts of stuff [read: sociological variables], including what other people actually know, or think they know?’, I enquired after three hours of debate which fulfilled every ethnographer’s dream: to see his research agenda torn to shreds and reassembled again. Yes, of course it did: but hadn’t I known

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Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Contesting culture*

that all along, living in Southall, and didn't the people at College know that already?

If what counted as cross-community depended on such a variety of factors, recognized as mutually independent variables even by youngsters, the same had surely to apply to what counted as *community* in the first place. The idea did not please me. For one thing, it made my research look stupid: what was the point of calling activities cross-community or community if Southallians half my age knew that the division depended on context and contingency? Secondly, I did not like the idea because all this awareness of shifting identities seemed to jar with Southallians' predilection for instant categorization or 'telling'. Just as I had learned to 'tell' Catholics from Protestants over seven years' living in Belfast, so I had learned, in Southall, to tell an East African Sikh from a Punjabi one by the fold of his turban, and to deduce on sight the 'community' of the woman ahead of me in the greengrocer's check-out queue. One of these young friends, who now demolished my research plan, had once brought me a list of family names and castes: a concordance he had asked his grandmother to help him with, so that I should know the caste of each kid in class when I took up auxiliary teaching in a Southall school. So *community* was a concept to be used and redefined contextually, but certainly it could not be written off as an irrelevancy. The same went for *culture* in its reified form. 'In my culture we do', and 'in our culture we don't' were ever-available phrases to 'explain' why people did or did not do as had been expected of them. Young Southallians seemed at once to reify their *cultures* and *communities*, and to deny their own reifications.

During the second phase of research, I looked to adult Southallians to help throw light on my accumulated bafflements. It seemed to be they who best knew which *community* was which, and what *culture* it stood for. The shift happened gradually as young Southallians invited me to meet their parents, neighbours invited me to weddings and birthday parties, and I pursued the adult contacts I had made in community centres and temples, churches and schools, tandoori shops and pubs. I felt more confident now in talking to adults, despite the fact that my lessons in Punjabi and Urdu had borne little fruit. I had discovered that all but a few Southallians mastered English with a fluency I would never achieve in any of the 'community languages', and I had therefore changed my language strategy to learning extensive glossaries of vernacular key words that had no easy equivalent in English, such as kinship, religious, and various normative terms. It remained a source of constant

amazement to me how the tone of a conversation changed when, being told of, say, an uncle who had said this or that, I enquired whether this was the *chacha*, the *thaia*, or the *mama*. People would not hesitate, after such an intervention, to use whatever other vernacular terms they thought untranslatable; and if I did not know one at first, I made sure I would know it next time. 'The most important thing about the first interview is the second interview' became my motto in pursuing research with adults who, unlike youths, often expected the researcher to interview them, rather than to sit around waiting to see what the chat or 'lark' might come to focus on.

Adult Southallians were no less relativist than their children in discussing *culture* and *community*. Even assuming that community was a matter of birthplace, as the dominant discourse so often does, some Southallians could, among friends, squeeze a laugh out of the absurdities of ethnic classification. 'See me friend Jas here', said Phil, an Englishman, and pointed to his drinking-mate at the Railway Tavern bar, 'he's an Asian, but he's born in Africa, so I'd say he's an African. And me, I was born in Burma, so I'm the Asian here, aren't I. And Winston here, you think he's a West Indian: he's the only one of us born in this town, so he's the Englishman born and bred!' Attributions of culture and community can clearly not be reduced to one factor alone. Rather, all but the most single-minded of adult Southallians, it turned out, regarded themselves as members of several *communities* at once, each with its own *culture*. Making one's life meant ranging across them. I did find a few people who said: 'I am a Muslim and nothing else', 'I am a Christian and have no other community', or 'I am an African from the Caribbean, but as African as the people born in Africa'. I have tried not to discount their positions in the body of the book, and have mentioned them wherever the ethnographic context allowed it. Nevertheless, the vast majority of all adult Southallians saw themselves as members of several *communities*, each with its own *culture*. The same person could speak and act as a member of the Muslim *community* in one context, in another take sides against other Muslims as a member of the Pakistani *community*, and in a third count himself part of the Punjabi *community* that excluded other Muslims but included Hindus, Sikhs, and even Christians. In this way, they echoed the awareness of shifting identities that young Southallians had alerted me to. Matters got more confusing, however, as fieldwork progressed. Some Hindu parents would claim that 'all Sikhs are Hindus'; some Sikh parents would dissociate themselves from the Sikh *community* and describe their culture as

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Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Contesting culture*

'British-Asian, basically, whatever the religion you're from'; and Muslim friends would argue with pride that the local mosque was in itself a *multi-cultural community*. Clearly, all these utterances could be discounted as if they were mere figures of speech. But when an ethnographer collects more of them by the week, should one not ask what makes these usages any less important, authentic, or truthful than the usages that equate culture with community; community with ethnic identity; and ethnic identity with the 'cause' of a person's doings or sayings?

The equation of culture with community was cast in doubt by more adult Southallians as time went on. Fundamental though it was in some contexts, it seemed self-defeatingly simple in others. Sometimes, Sikh Southallians would subdivide their *community* into *communities* of caste, although at other times they would insist that Sikhism entailed a denial of caste altogether. Many Hindu Southallians, though certainly not all, could endorse a Hindu culture that encompassed not only sections of the Sikh *community*, but other *cultures* too. At other times, the same people would blame 'Untouchables' for taking such an 'impure' stance. Irish Southallians were sure that they formed part of an Irish *culture*, but denied the existence of an Irish *community*; English Southallians were unsure how to apply either term to themselves or their neighbours, unless their neighbours were 'coloured', that is, 'people of ethnicity' as certified by the dominant discourse. Afro-Caribbean Southallians spoke of a *community* that had, as yet, not 'found its own *culture*'. Again, none of these further statements should be taken at face value. Yet they cannot be written off either, and what they add up to, I shall argue, is an alternative to the dominant discourse. It does not replace that dominant discourse. But in many contexts this demotic discourse counteracts the dominant one by drawing attention to the daily process of 'making culture', rather than 'having a culture'.

The dominant discourse relies on equating community, culture, and ethnic identity, and its protagonists can easily reduce anybody's behaviour to a symptom of this equation. So long as its human objects can be logged under some ethnic identity other than, say, British, German, or American, it can even claim to speak 'for' them, 'represent' them, explain them to others. The ways in which Southallians spoke about each other and about themselves added up to a very different message: *culture* and *community* could be equated in some contexts, but were not the same in others. What the word 'identity' might mean in any one context, was a question of context. Fortunately, I had not yet worked out these ideas when I set out, with new friends, on the third phase of research.

*Introduction: the process of research* 7

This was to achieve two independent aims: on the one hand, it was to check up on the qualitative insights I had gathered by pitching them against quantitative data to confirm or contradict the results. On the other hand, it was to supplement my own efforts with qualitative research done independently by trained students.

The transformation of qualitative work into quantitative research had been started already. My colleague and friend Marie Gillespie and I had devised a questionnaire which addressed both her research concerns and my own and was based on the data each of us had gathered independently. Dr Gillespie wanted to collect statistical data on young Southallians' uses and views of the media, having given the subject some five years of ethnographic attention (Gillespie 1989, 1995). I wanted to find statistical confirmation or counter-evidence for the hunches I had formulated on 'cross-community peer influences' among Southall youths. Our combined questionnaire made a point of asking locally relevant questions in local terms, language, and style. It was piloted several times, and in the end we managed to administer it to some 350 young Southallians. Portions of this bulky survey of ninety-odd detailed questions were also to serve as a means of entry into the ethnographic field for three further researchers on whose work this book draws. Each of the three went through their own process of research.

I had previously enjoyed the co-operation of two interested students who joined me in Southall to conduct their own fieldwork. Richard Hundleby had researched a subtle and insightful case-study of local stereotypes about Afro-Caribbean youth; Bryn Williams had pointed to the 'West London culture' shared among a wide variety of Southall youths observed during a drama summer school. Now, the Leverhulme Trust had generously granted me some additional funds to pay for three more fellow researchers. These researchers were outstanding final-year students at Brunel University, specializing in Anthropology and Sociology. They had three tasks. The first was to further their own academic growth by involving themselves in real-life research, pursued not as a methodological exercise, but as a full-time preoccupation for five months of fieldwork and a year's unrelenting work in writing their BSc dissertations about it. I wanted these dissertations to be of the highest quality, so as to have a secondary literature with which to compare, and by which to judge, my own results. I cannot pretend, of course, that I never influenced their approaches to the work in hand; but nor would they, or indeed I, accept that I did more than alert them to two essential caveats: firstly, social groups should be distinguished from social categories,

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[More information](#)8 *Contesting culture*

whether these be called tribes or communities, races, generations, or castes. All of these terms designated categories that Southallians might, or might not, use in one context or another. The task was to document their uses, rather than take the words at face value and then peddle them as self-evident analytical concepts. Secondly, by stereotyping informants as 'belonging to' or even 'speaking for' a pre-defined 'community', one runs the risk of tribalizing people, instead of listening to them, and might end up studying communities of the researcher's own making.

Whether these caveats were an intrusion upon their independence of thinking or a precaution against commissioning three more studies that would replicate the dominant discourse, readers of their ethnographies can decide for themselves. Hazel Yabsley's dissertation (1990) explored 'Processes [*sic*] of ethnicity and community' on the most deprived of Southall's multi-ethnic housing estates, and drew attention to conceptions of spatial proximity, something I have not made enough of in this book. Barbara Hawkes' (1990a) 'Southall, An Ethnography of Change' analysed the self-understandings and selective cross-*community* alliances current among 'English' Southallians, and Teresa McGarry (1990) examined notions of *culture* and *community* among the three cohorts of Irish Southallians she was able to discern.

Their combined work produced a body of documentation as good as any that an ethnographer of 'communities' in Britain could draw upon. I have therefore used Hundleby (1987) and Hawkes (1990), McGarry (1990) and Yabsley (1990) as one would use any body of secondary literature gathered by others in the same field: quoting from it where it is relevant to the argument, spelling out agreements and disagreements where they arise, and drawing on transcripts of informants' statements where they could help to substantiate or qualify the argument. In the latter case, I have sometimes included the questions posed alongside the statements elicited. This is to allow readers to locate the context of informants' utterances, as well as to reassure themselves of the fieldwork rapport and high ethnographic standards that all four of the authors have brought to their work. In case it needs saying, all their contributions have been acknowledged by name and my uses of their materials checked with them. Moving the matter beyond attributional ethics, I must add that their findings have been invaluable in contextualizing, correcting, delimiting, and refining the argument put forth in the following pages. This argument will seek its strength from data, rather than deduction, but it needs first to be situated in its anthropological and political contexts.



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### The argument: identifying a dominant discourse

The reification of culture

The discourse of 'community' on the basis of ethnicity

The dominant discourse in Britain

Presentation of the data

#### **The reification of culture**

No idea is as fundamental to an anthropological understanding of social life as the concept of culture. At the same time, no anthropological term has spread into public parlance and political discourse as this word has done over the past twenty years. Together with the word community, it has become the cornerstone of public discourse about ethnic minorities. Thus, whether the people concerned be immigrants in Europe, native or hyphenated Americans, or warring 'ethnic groups' in the Third World and the post-socialist Second, political discourse is couched in the language of separate communities defined by their cultures that demand collective recognition and rights. An almost global range of contestations and conflicts thus appears to rely upon a vocabulary developed by anthropologists. Yet the word culture need not mean the same in political rhetoric or informants' usages as it does in anthropological analysis. To distinguish these meanings, though also to see where they overlap, is the chief task of this book.

Its ethnographic focus is Southall, a multi-ethnic town on the outskirts of London. Southall numbers some 60,000 people of internally highly diverse South Asian, Afro-Caribbean, Irish, English, and various other ethnic or national backgrounds. The obvious starting-point for fieldwork in such an 'immigrant ghetto' would have been to concentrate on a 'community study': to select one community, preferably national, religious or ethnic, and to describe it as an autonomous culture. Some of

10 *Contesting culture*

these community studies I had read, but the recipe seemed uncomfortably predictable: page one isolated some community of culture that the author had pre-defined, and the final page concluded that it, or they, were 'encapsulated'. The author's conclusion, in other words, seemed predetermined by the fieldworker's starting-point. Yet in Southall there seemed to be communities within communities, as well as cultures across communities. The equation between community and culture, dominant as it is in much public discourse about ethnic minorities, disintegrated the more I got to know Southallians. As I have indicated, Southallians indeed replicated the equation between a *community* and its *culture* in a number of contexts. But in others, the same Southallians could dissolve the dominant equation by statements such as: 'In our *community*, we don't have a *culture*'; 'Of course we have a *culture*, but we're not a *community*'; or 'That [other] *community* is really part of our *culture*.'

The words *culture* and *community* were thus used in two systematically different ways among Southallians themselves. One range of usages reflected the dominant discourse as emphasized by many experts in 'community relations', many community studies and also, remarkably, by their political opponents who blamed 'ethnic minorities' and their reified 'cultures' for the 'social problems' facing 'the nation'. Besides engaging this dominant discourse, however, local usages established an alternative discourse which I have called demotic (lit. 'of the people'), and which denied the congruence between *culture* and *community* that was the hallmark of the dominant discourse.

In using the word 'discourse' to gloss these two ranges, I am aware, of course, that the term has assumed a bewildering vagueness as it has spread from the humanities to the social sciences. Yet I share Lutz and Abu-Lughod's (1990) view that 'rather than being alarmed by its spread ..., it might be better to ask ... what theoretical work ... [one] want[s] the term to do' (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990, 7). Of the uses they delineate, I subscribe to two in particular. One is to help focus the analysis of language and other social practices on pragmatics, rather than semantics, and the other is to relate these 'large-scale pragmatics' to the efficacy of power relations (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990, 9–10). Arrestingly, the very spread of the term 'discourse' may be related to what I have here called the reification of culture:

For many, ... the term [culture] seems to connote a certain coherence, uniformity and timelessness in the meaning systems of a given group, and to operate rather like the earlier concept of 'race' in identifying fundamentally different, essentialized, and homogenous social units (as when we speak about 'a culture').