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Researching British Born Minority Ethnic Girls and Crime

The study of British born, minority ethnic girls as offenders has received a serious lack of attention from research; little is known about this group. Where are these girls in criminological debates? What is known about their criminality? This paper will discuss the nature of research undertaken on the criminality of minority ethnic girls by understanding girls' experiences of crime through the adaptation of Pat Carlen's work (*Women, Crime and Poverty*, 1988) and new biographical readings that incorporate culture. The focus on the girls' voices, through the use of biography, provides a wealth of knowledge and understanding regarding this unknown entity. The intersection of different variables (gender, poverty, care, culture, race and ethnicity) shall be identified as shaping the lives and experiences of minority ethnic girl offenders. The paper shall focus exclusively on presenting an account of the research methodology rather than the research findings, as these are still in working process.

(1) Introduction – Who, What, Where and Why?

It is important to place the research in its context, in terms of highlighting the subject and the milieu in which the research has been undertaken. African-Caribbean girls and those from the Indian Sub-Continent were the two prime, minority ethnic groups that were the subjects of the research. These two groups represent Britain's largest minority ethnic populations, with people from the Indian Sub-Continent (otherwise referred to as Asian) making up 2.7% of the British population, and African-Caribbean's making up approximately 1.4%, according to the 1991 census (Cashmore, 1996). Other minority ethnic girls were interviewed, but the numbers were extremely small (Table 1 is a breakdown of the different minority ethnic girls interviewed). For the purpose of this paper the focus shall be on African-Caribbean girls and girls from the Indian Sub-Continent.

Minority Ethnic Group	Number Interviewed
African-Caribbean	6
Indian Sub-Continent	5
Indian	(2)
Pakistani	(1)
Bangladeshi	(2)
Vietnamese	1
Mixed Heritage	3
Chinese&English	(1)
Pakistani&English	(1)
Caribbean&English	(1)
TOTAL	16

Table 1.

The research aims to understand the criminality of British born minority ethnic girls. The age range of the girls interviewed is from 14 to 19 years old. All the girls are British born and are either second or third generation minority ethnic. Issues of poverty, abuse, gendered socialisation, ethnicity and culture have been investigated in the research as factors influencing the criminality of these minority ethnic girls. The intersection of these factors provides an in-depth account of the biographies of these girls, indicating conditions intrinsic to their criminality.

In-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with sixteen minority ethnic girls in the West Yorkshire region of England. All the girls were individually introduced to the research prior to the interview, which provided an opportunity to gain their consent to participate in the research and also to inform them of the structure of the interview. The aims and objectives of the research were also presented to the girls at this stage. All the girls were identified offenders in terms that they had been processed by the criminal justice system and as a consequence were serving either custodial or non-custodial penalties. Contact with the girls was established through criminal justice agencies such as the prison service, youth justice teams, social services, and the probation service. These criminal justice agencies acted as gatekeepers.

Race was an important tool in terms of identifying the research subject. Minority ethnic girls that were phenotypically distinct from the majority population were chosen. The focus on phenotypic difference between the minority ethnic groups chosen and the majority population is important in terms of identifying the role of racial discrimination as a factor influencing criminality. It is important to state at this point that I recognise that racism is not always based upon phenotypic characteristics. Racial discrimination has always been a controversial subject in British discourse.

A wealth of British research has been undertaken in the area of race and crime. Such research has tended to focus upon the criminality of African-Caribbean males. There has been some work on minority ethnic women and crime (for example, by Chigwada-Bailey, 1997), but it has been extremely limited. The work in this area has repeatedly identified the importance of race, of phenotypic difference, as being a key area of debate regarding the criminality and experiences of criminal justice for African-Caribbean males. Research by British scholars such as Stuart Hall et al (1978), Lea and Young (1984) and Paul Gilroy (1982) have debated, at great length, the criminality of African-Caribbean males, identifying the role of factors such as racial discrimination, class status and culture as determining criminality. A similar pattern has emerged in the 1990s with regards to the criminality of males from the Indian Sub-Continent (Webster 1997, FitzGerald, 1998). The new folk devil is specifically seen to be 'Asian', young and male. Criminological research on minority ethnic groups and crime have principally focused on male criminality.

With regards to this, issues of gender have also been the focus of debate in British criminology. British scholars such as Carol Smart (1977, 1979) identified the lack of focus by criminological researchers on female criminality and other scholars such as Pat Carlen (1985, 1988, 1998) have highlighted the differential experiences of criminal justice and criminality encountered by females in comparison to their male counterparts. For Carlen,

'different modes of social regulation of women have resulted in their patterns of

law-breaking, criminalisation and penal regulation being different again from those of men' (1988:5).

One can not assume that experiences of criminality and criminal justice are the same for both male and female groups, whether part of the majority population or minority ethnic groups. Thus, there is a need to account for difference based on gender (along side class and racial) divisions. Feminist commentators such as Carlen (1988) have brought to the fore issues of gender discrimination in the British criminal justice system. For example, Carlen identifies the treatment of women as offenders in the criminal justice system to be disproportionate when compared to their male counterparts. Carlen highlights the lack of non-custodial penalties and after-care facilities, and the conditions in female prisons as physical inequalities based on gender. Furthermore, Carlen highlights ideological notions of gender roles and femininity as also discriminating female offenders as they are perceived as being '*doubly deviant*' because they have rebelled against gender norms as a consequence of their involvement in criminal and deviant activities.

With regards to the criminological debates on race and crime, and also women and crime, issues of discrimination and difference are at the nucleus. Thus, with reference to this research such issues are pertinent to understanding the criminality and experience of criminal justice for minority ethnic girls. For example, are issues of racial or gender discrimination influencing their criminality? Do minority ethnic girls experience gender or racial discrimination in the criminal justice system? This research attempts to fill the gap that exists in criminology by investigating the criminality of minority ethnic girls. The research is an embryonic attempt to act as a catalyst towards a thorough investigation into this much neglected area.

(2) Looking to Pat Carlen 'Women, Crime and Poverty'

The work of British Criminologist Pat Carlen has provided an important reference point to this research. Notably, Carlen's work '*Women, Crime and Poverty*' (1988) was *an ethnographic study based on thirty-nine female offenders aged between 15 to 46. Carlen's study was undertaken in the Southern area of England. The main aim of Carlen's work was,*

'to discover what they [the female offenders] themselves saw as being major influences on and turning points in their criminal careers; and second to explain both the sources of those self perceptions and their effects' (1988:46).

Carlen's work is an ethnographic analysis of female law-breaking and the official criminal justice responses to it by presenting biographies of the women she interviews.

Gender discrimination and class disadvantage such as poverty and care are key factors that Carlen discusses. Carlen is presenting a gender and class analysis of the women's biographies. Although Carlen acknowledges issues of racial discrimination by undertaking a small number of interviews with minority ethnic women, she does not present a thorough analysis of such issues. For example, Carlen does not engage in cultural or ethnicity debates that are intrinsic to the identity of minority ethnic females in British society. Carlen briefly identifies the differential experiences of minority ethnic females and those of the majority population by stating that,

'If they are black, overcriminalisation is even more likely to occur... and with a lower likelihood of actual law breaking being one of its preconditions' (1988:6).

Carlen highlights that female offenders experience gender discrimination within the British criminal justice system, but that the situation for minority ethnic females, as a consequence of their phenotypic difference from the majority population is exacerbated, as they become the victims of gender and racial discrimination. Hence, they become '*over-criminalised*'.

Carlen has produced a comprehensive table that has aided her ethnographic analysis of female law-breaking. The table (table 2.) presents a deconstruction of a sequence of events that have occurred in the early lives of the female offenders that Carlen interviewed. The interplay of class and gender, as economic and ideological conditions, alongside racism and problems associated with being brought up in institutional Care are used to facilitate the investigation of the criminal careers of the women. For example, the role of disadvantaged class status, such as the lack of money or material goods experienced by females in specific environments, is read as influencing their deviant or law-breaking activities. The role of Care is depicted as being extremely important in terms of shaping the criminal career of some of the young women that Carlen interviewed, as twenty-two of the thirty-nine women had spent some time in Care. As exemplified by Carlen's table, Care is an important starting point in her research, for analysing the development of criminal careers of twenty-two of the women she interviewed, as it is in this environment that the girls gain a sense of deprivation and difference. Carlen identifies a series of inequalities based on class, gender and race, experienced by the females, as contributing to deviancy and law-breaking activities.

This research on understanding the criminality of minority ethnic girls has incorporated and extended upon Carlen's work by considering the interplay of gender, class, race and culture with regards to how these variables impact upon the criminality and lives of minority ethnic girls.

Criminal Career Stage	Economic and Ideological Conditions		Racism	Deviant or Law-breaking Activities	Consequences
	Class	Gender			
Entry into Care	Pre-11- parents lack money and access to other material and therefore cannot meet extra financial demands	Post-11 1. self referral 2. referred by parent/guardians who fear that girl's behaviour is gender deviant	Disproportionate removal of ethnic minority children from their homes.	Post-11 – status offences e.g. staying out too late at night, truancy, general 'unfeminine' behaviour.	1.Excessive assessment. 2. Attempts to escape Care. 3. Quest for 'care' outside the institution.
'Trouble' in Residential Institutions	1.Developing sense of being in the 'Care' class. 2. Lack of control over life chances. 3. Absence of sense of class.	1. Castigation of women via talk. 2. Higher standards of behaviour expected adolescent girls than of boys. 3. Insensitive response to girls' physical development 4. Uninformed regarding sex.	1. Brought up 'white'. 2.Racist presumptions about black children in Care. 3. Black women & promiscuity. 4. Isolation from other black people.	1. Drug-taking 2. Absconding 3. Petty crime	1. Difference/isolation. 2. Movement between places to Secure Unit. 3. Attempts to abscond. 4. Drugs administered to control behaviour. 5. Use of 'independent' accommodation.
Into Crime	1. Increased poverty. 2. No longer protected by Care.	1.Court's reaction to girls in Care. 2. Fewer non-custodial facilities for women. 3. Self-protection on street leads to criminalisation. 4. Escalation of young women up sentencing tariff.	1. Racism from the police. 2. Ethnic minority girls under greater public surveillance.	1. Crimes for survival while on the run. 2. Drugs 3. Some organised crime.	1. Attachment to 'Care' draws attention. 2. Magistrates react negatively to females in Care. 3. Custody likely as the women have been through the system.
Out of Residential Care	1. Extreme poverty. 2. Difficulties with social security. 3. Living in hostels. 4. Awareness of social stigma.	1.Lack of housing for single women – gender inappropriate. 2. Awareness of failure to fit gender ideologies.	Affects housing and employment opportunities.	1. Prostitution 2. Theft 3. Petty Offending Crimes for economic survival.	1.Some choose to 'live rough' rather than in hostels. 2. Pregnancy 3. Ill-equipped to look after themselves. 4. Once apprehended their institutional life goes against them. 5. Law-breaking seen as only way of making a living.
Into Custody	1. Prison a refuge from poverty. 2. No belief in being able to make the class deal and therefore no interest to conform.	1. Few after-care facilities for women. 2. Housing situation worse for ex-offenders. 3. No belief in making the gender deal.	Exists at both covert and overt levels from institution to institution.	1. Create trouble in Youth Custody Centres in order to stay. 2. Invoke 'hard girl' status to gain reputation. 3. Self-mutilation.	1. Custody results in loss of possessions & accommodation. 2. Children go into Care. 3. Cumulative effects of institutionalisation but nothing to gain from conformity.

Table 2. - taken from Carlen 1988: 76-78

(3) The Use of Biography

The research is attempting to map biographies of minority ethnic girl offenders. Biography is about life writing and encompasses a number of different methods from life stories, journals and case studies to profiles and autobiographies. A person observing the life of an individual or group writes the biography. Denzin (1989:7) refers to the biographical method as that which describes '*turning-point moments in individuals' lives*'. Hence, with regards to this research the focus is upon life accounts, significant moments in the lives of minority ethnic girls who have engaged in law-breaking and deviant activities. Biography is an ethnographic method, which allows the researcher to undertake in-depth investigation into individuals and groups.

The biographical method enables the researcher to explore and thoroughly investigate key moments in an individual/group's life. For example with regards to this research, what factors have determined the criminality of minority ethnic girls? What are the significant moments, or turning points, in these girls' lives that have influenced their position in society as a juvenile female offender? The biographies are focused on the girls' life experiences. Biographies require themes to be developed and focused, guiding the inquiry and the compilation of life information. At the nucleus of the research is girls' criminality from which various key themes have developed and been investigated as a consequence of the girls' re-counting their life experiences. For example, the role of economic and ideological conditions such as class and gender, and socially determined conditions such as culture and racism. These conditions are manifested in different milieus such as within the family, school, local environment, Care, the criminal justice system, peer groups and majority society. Such conditions are influenced and shaped by the various social spheres that the minority ethnic girls live in. Thus, biographical accounts obtained by minority ethnic girls provide an insight into the significance of disparate conditions and environments in determining their criminality.

(4) Making Sense of the Fieldwork

The method of mapping biographies requires the analysis and evaluation of an abundant volume of data. Researching lives and investigating significant moments obligates the researcher to take into account the development of new themes and issues that are important in terms of girls' accounting their life histories and significant moments. It is also vital to acknowledge difference as the research is dealing with a group of dissimilar minority ethnic girls - they are not a homogenous group. Thus, drawing upon the work of Carlen, a table (table 3. – the analysis of the intersection of factors and conditions influencing the criminality of minority ethnic girls) has been developed to analyse and make sense of the biographical data collected. Key thematic economic, ideological and socially determined conditions such as class, gender, race/racism and culture, were identified as part of the process of analysis of the fieldwork data. These conditions are key to the accounts of all the girls interviewed, therefore providing a structure for comparison between the girls whilst allowing for their individual biographies to remain intact.

The table is currently working progress and aims to analyse the girls' biographies, by investigating the conditions and factors, and their intersection, with regards to their

influence on the criminality of minority ethnic girls. The table identifies the circumstances in which girls' criminality and its nature, has been determined, such as the home, school, peer groups, local environment, majority society, Care and the criminal justice system. Class, gender, race/racism and culture as economic, ideological and socially determined conditions are given individual attention so that the role of these as influencing minority ethnic girls' criminality can be analysed. Certain environments and contexts have a significant effect on people. As Marx (1852/1983:287) observed, men and women,

'make their own history, but not... under conditions they have chosen for themselves; rather on terms immediately existing, given and handed down to them'.

Thus, are these minority ethnic girls a product of the conditions they've experienced in specific environments? And is class the dominant variable that shapes their life biographies? Or, rather is it a series of variables? It is within different environments such as the home or in society that girls become conscious of some of the conditions that shape their lives; conditions that enhances their awareness of isolation, difference and inequality. However, Carlen identified the limits of the consciousness of the women she interviewed, particularly with regards to their economic status determining their criminality. Thus, there is a need for the researcher to interpret the biographical data by identifying significant moments and key factors influencing the criminality of minority ethnic girls. For example, the influence of the family upon girls in terms of class status and gendered socialisation.

(5) Conclusion

The paper has intended to provide an overview of the research methodology undertaken in the study of understanding the criminality of British born minority ethnic girls. The research is currently in the phase of data analysis, which is due to be completed in July 2000. Table 3, the analysis of the intersection of factors and conditions influencing the criminality of minority ethnic girls, is working progress, intending to analyse the factors and conditions, which influence the criminality of minority ethnic girls. The research is a significant contribution to the current gap in criminological knowledge on minority ethnic girls' offending.

Table 3. Analysis of the intersection of factors and conditions influencing the criminality of minority ethnic girls

FACTORS/ ENVIRONMENT INFLUENCING OFFENDING	ECONOMIC AND IDEOLOGICAL CONDITIONS		SOCIALLY DETERMINED CONDITIONS	
	CLASS	GENDER	RACE/RACISM	CULTURE
HOME/ FAMILY	1. Disadvantaged family background. 2. Unemployment within the family. 3. Family involvement in criminal activities 4. Broken families i.e. single-parent household.	1. Patriarchal nature of household i.e. female lives determined by males. 2. Matriarchal family structure of African-Caribbean households	1. Ethnic chauvinism i.e. racial bigotry. 2. 'Them' and 'Us' culture. 3. Perceptions of majority population and other minorities developed.	1. Strong cultural environment for the girls from the Indian Sub-Continent – family maintenance of culture. 2. Family punishment for crime = severe. 3. <i>Izzat</i> – girls from the Indian Sub-Continent
SCHOOL/ EDUCATION	1. Low expectations by teachers. 2. Poor schooling. 3. Low educational aspirations	Pedagogy of low expectations of minority ethnic girls.	1. Experiences of racist name-calling 2. Presumed low achievement of certain minority ethnic groups such as African-Caribbeans and Pakistanis	1. Lack of understanding within school of non-white cultures. 2. Introduced to western, 'white' culture – beginning of culture conflict. 3. Perceived inferiority of non-white cultures.
FRIENDS/ PEER GROUP	1. Friends involved in criminal activities 2. Poor class background of friends.	1. Competition with males. 2. Criminal activities influenced by males e.g. boyfriend, father, brother	1. Acceptable usage of terms such as 'nigger', 'paki'. 2. Racial allegiance of 'non-whites'	1. Re-establishing cultural identity through music, fashion etc.
LOCAL AREA	1. Lack of facilities for youth e.g. youth club. 2. Boredom. 3. Disadvantaged and deprived area.	1. Low numbers of girls 'hanging out' i.e. low visibility of girls particularly at night.	1. High minority ethnic population in local area.	1. Multi-cultural areas e.g. African-Caribbeans, Asians, white British. 2. Importance of local cultural community i.e. reaffirms identity.
CARE SYSTEM	1. Awareness of poverty associated with being in Care. 2. School of crime.	1. Sexual/physical abuse experienced by girls in Care. 2. Considered delinquent because in Care.	1. Presence of racial discrimination. 2. Brought up by white carers i.e. racial identity conflict, lack of understanding of needs e.g. Afro hair care.	1. Loss of cultural identity in Care i.e. weak/no culture. 2. Exposed to 'white', British culture – cultural/identity conflict. 3. Cultural identity not recognised – cultural isolation
BRITISH SOCIETY	1. Perceived as an under-privileged group.	1. Perceived as 'doubly deviant'. 2. Rebellion against gender roles.	1. Awareness of racial discrimination in society. 2. Awareness of difference	1. Culture conflict – exposed to British and minority culture.
CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM	1. Concentration of police in poor areas.	1. Awareness of being a minority with the CJS in terms of being a female. 2. Sexism by female police officers. 3. Lack of facilities to deal with female offenders	1. Objects of racist policing/CJ practices. 2. Great surveillance of minority ethnic communities i.e. 'police property' (Reiner, 1992)	1. Lack of understanding regarding cultural practices.

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