

THE ASIAN GANG:

ETHNICITY, IDENTITY, MASCULINITY

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CONTEXT



The Asian gang is an idea that has gained currency in the media. The mass media have reinvented the image of young Asian men, transforming them into a new 'folk devil'. There has been an increase in stories about criminality, violence and rioting. The Asian gang is young, male, working class or underclass and linked to Islamic fundamentalism.

Increasingly, says Alexander, it has become difficult to talk or write about young Asian men without drawing on this stereotype. She cites the example of a court case involving a stabbing, in which the jury reached a wrong verdict because they could only understand the incident in terms of a gang fight which made the victim seem a deviant because 'they're all as bad as each other'. The gang, says Alexander, is more of an idea than a fact, but an idea that has the power to become self-fulfilling. The Asian gang has three related aspects:

✱ youth, ethnicity and masculinity. ✱

Britain's Asian communities are often held to be more peaceful and law abiding than, for example, African Caribbean communities. It is assumed that the strength of culture, language and religion imposes constraints on individuals which make them less likely to turn to deviance. For the white majority, Asian communities might be alien and hard to understand, but they are not seen as a problem in terms of criminality or deviance (apart, perhaps, from concerns about illegal immigration). This can be seen as a strength (as in the multicultural celebration of difference) but also a weakness in that Asian communities have been seen as alien, unable and unwilling to assimilate. The latter concerns surfaced in the Salman Rushdie affair and during protests against the Gulf War, and then in the Bradford riots of 1995. At the heart of perceptions of cultural difference is Islam. This perception of Asian communities as culturally different has distracted attention away from their oppression as minorities, and from a long history of resistance. Moreover, while African Caribbeans were seen as male, associated with crime and violence, Asian communities, says Alexander, were imagined as female because the focus of concern was on gender-related and family-related issues such as forced marriages.

✱ This established view of Asian communities underwent a change in the mid-1990s. Two crucial events in this were the murder of a white teenager Richard Everitt, in London in 1994, for which an Asian boy was sentenced to life imprisonment, and the Bradford riots a year later. Asian working-class young men, behaving in similar ways to other working-class young men, were then perceived as a threat; the image of young Asian men changed from passivity to aggression. Alexander traces the development of the moral panic in the media. 'Asian teenage gangs terrorising London' was a story in the *Evening Standard* (13th November 1996). News stories explicitly linked the emergence of 'gangs' to urban decay, poverty and the rise of an underclass. ✱

This reporting coincided with a rise in Islamophobia (fear of Islam), in which earlier white fears about the presence of black communities in Britain were transferred from African Caribbeans to Asian Muslims. It also connected with sociological discussions of a crisis in masculinity; the young men concerned, it was claimed, had been excluded from the established sources of prestige for men through working to support a family, and turned to violence, criminality and drug taking. A further facet of the picture drawn by the media was of a generation gap, which alienated young men from their parents' generation and weakened the ties of community, religion and family which inhibited deviance.

A further context to the research, and to an understanding of the idea of Asian gangs, is the structural position of Bengalis in British society. The boys she studied were third and fourth generation; the hopes that migrants to Britain had for their children and

grandchildren had not been fulfilled. The PSI survey in 1997¹ describes Pakistanis and Bangladeshis (treated together despite their differences) as facing multiple disadvantages, with high rates of unemployment, high numbers without educational qualifications and so on. The research was carried out in a deprived and decaying area of London – male unemployment on the 'Stoneleigh Estate' was 32%.

METHODS



Alexander's research was ethnographic, based on forming a relationship with the respondents in their own territory and using a variety of methods. She treats interviews as her main method, but in this kind of research interview findings blend into observations, comments from informal conversations and so on. Alexander's life centred on the research and the people involved in it for several years and, in the conclusion, she makes it clear that the personal ties continued long after the research was officially over.

The research project was based on Alexander's involvement in the Stoneleigh Asian Youth Organisation (SAYO). She found SAYO through contacting local youth services and organisations; SAYO suited her because it was in the part of London in which she lived; an area which had not already been heavily researched. SAYO's members were mainly aged between 16 and 22 and had a reputation as troublemakers and rebels. Hassan, the worker in charge, told her that they were 'out of control, religious, unemployed and probably unemployable, failed at school, into drugs and crime and violence ... and of course they were sexist.' The young men studied are described as Bengali because this is how they described themselves. They only described themselves as Muslim when discussing religion or media representations of Islam. They were from working-class backgrounds.

Alexander was initially nervous and did not know how to begin talking to the boys. They paid little attention to her. Then Hassan was hit by one of the boys; he left and the project closed for three months until a new worker, Yasmin, a Bengali woman, was appointed. Alexander had to renegotiate her access, but her real involvement began through acting as a volunteer (keeping the pool table booking list, serving refreshments and so on). She began to talk to the boys and gradually, almost without realising it, came to be important to them.

Yasmin acted as a gatekeeper and became central to the research. Alexander became, in the boys' eyes, Yasmin's sidekick, half of a double act. Yasmin taught Alexander a lot about Asian and Bengali culture, and they travelled to India together. Alexander says that, in some sense, Yasmin was equally responsible for the book.

Alexander began interviewing the boys 18 months after first entering the project. By this time the club had divided into junior and senior sections, and Alexander had decided to focus on the juniors, though she interviewed some of the seniors, and youth and community workers as well. Each interview lasted between an hour and five-and-a-half hours, in the club or in one of the young men's homes. In the book, the boys are referred to by fictitious names, which they chose themselves; Alexander wanted to allow them to feel some sense of ownership of her work. They took an interest in her (as a young Asian woman in her thirties, it was assumed that marriage must be imminent) and in her work. A boy doing A-level Sociology read one of the chapters, then passed it to others, so that one of the younger boys remarked to Alexander, 'So, Claire, the new Asian folk devil, what do you think?' and others would remark, 'Put that in the book, Claire' or make other sardonic comments. She took part in many trips and events with the boys, including organising a fashion parade and a residential trip to Tunisia.

Alexander's research was also part of a personal journey for her. Her mother was Indian but was fostered at birth and later adopted by a white English family and brought up in villages where she was the only 'black' child. Alexander did not meet an Asian person until at 19 she went to Oxford University. She felt Indian and wanted to explore this aspect of her background, but her attempts at university backfired, because she could not fit in with, or be accepted by, her Asian friends' families. She felt rejected and alienated. The boys at SAYO, by accepting her unquestioningly as Indian rather than English, and Yasmin, by educating her into Asian culture through shopping, clubbing and a visit to India, helped her gain a sense of belonging. During the research period she met her mother and comments that she could never have faced this meeting had she not known Yasmin and the SAYO boys.

KEY FINDINGS



Alexander's account of the boys bears little resemblance to the idea of the 'Asian gang'. She says that notions of the gang 'exist more as convenient fiction than as reality'. This is well illustrated by the account of the attempts by the Deputy Head at the school where the club was situated to lay the blame for incidents on a gang. He claimed not only that they were a gang but also to be able to identify ring leaders where, according to the boys, none existed. As far as they were concerned, they were just a group who hung around together. The boys were well aware of the association of gangs with criminality and how the label of 'gang' would work against them. They did not have the internal structure or coherence that the label suggests. The label of 'gang', however, was used by the school to misunderstand the situation. A dispute with a Nigerian boy was seen by the school as a racial incident:

all they (the school) could see was we were a gang out to get the black boy, that's all they could see, but they couldn't see what he done wrong. —

The alternative explanation – of a personal dispute – was ignored because it did not fit the representation of young Asian men as 'folk devils'. This incident added to sense of collective identity, expressed as 'standing up for ourselves', derived from a perceived history of their community in terms of battles. The boys were involved in many violent incidents, but Alexander shows that it is far too easy to explain these in terms of ethnic conflicts.

Peer group identities were shaped by ethnicity, age and masculinity, and these fed the notion of the gang. The idea of the gang is wholly negative, but Alexander shows that the boys' relationships were based on positive factors, such as solidarity and loyalty. Peer groups also existed within broader notions of community. The boys saw themselves as part of a wider community, and came to its defence when necessary. There were complex, shifting alliances and loyalties. Alexander is also able to show that the idea that young Asian men are alienated from community and family is wrong. In a chapter called *Brothers*, she explores the boys' relationships with their brothers. These relationships were characterised by respect. Loyalty to family and friends was a strongly held value. As one illustration of community, she describes a cricket match (in the week of the 1999 cricket World Cup final) which brought together many of the young men on the estate, an expression of a community limited by age and sex but far wider than any peer group.

Looking back over the years of research in her final chapter, Alexander comments that, while many of her memories are of the positive and the everyday, the tone of the book is darker than she would have expected. This is the result of the shadow cast by the idea of the Asian gang. Although a mistaken idea, it has real effects, for example, in the greater surveillance the boys were subjected to, in the attitude of the school towards them, and even in the very existence of SAYO, formed because the authorities defined the Asian boys as a 'problem'.

No
Alienation

IMPORTANCE



The alleged criminality of British Asians has been a grey area in the sociology of crime. Older text books tend to assume that any crime problem related to ethnicity is about African Caribbeans. Asians, it was assumed, have low rates of criminality because of the strength of family and community ties. By the late 1990s, this view clashed with a media picture of Asian boys forming gangs and becoming a cause of trouble. Alexander shows how this change happened quickly through the construction of a moral panic in the media around a series of incidents. This process will have intensified since the book's publication, first with 'rioting' in the summer of 2001 and then with the 11th September terrorist attacks and the demonisation by the media of Muslims, in Britain and elsewhere. Those who are already marginalised can be even more easily labelled as 'other'.

Alexander's own evidence is clear; the boys she studied, who were seen even by youth workers sympathetic to them as 'deviant', in no way constituted a gang. They faced pressures, not least from their school, to conform to the gang label, but their peer group and community ties were far more complex. The Asian gang is, on this evidence, a myth.

Alexander shows some of the reality behind the myth – a complex interplay of age, gender and ethnicity within which peer groups are formed and change. She shows the friendship and support the peer group provides, and how peer groups exist within wider networks of family and community. Despite the involvement of many of the boys in anti-

social incidents, they are shown as understandable human beings, far from the folk devils of popular discourse. Moreover their deviance is shown in its context: urban deprivation, strains caused by unemployment and other social problems, and the failure of the authorities to understand or support them. The success of some of the boys by the end of the project – two taking degrees, others moving into youth and community work and so on – is remarkable, but is balanced by other cases of imprisonment, unemployment and low-paid work without prospects.

EVALUATION



For Alexander, this is far more than a research project. Part of the book's attraction lies in the open discussion of her motivation and of the part SAYO came to play in her life. While describing how the boys at SAYO constructed their identities within the constraints imposed by the interpretations of them as folk devils, she also shows how her own story is about the construction of a very different Asian identity.

As with all ethnographic research, there has to be a warning not to assume that the findings are representative of other groups of Bengali boys, other Asian or black youths, or other areas. Stoneleigh and the school where SAYO is based have their own histories, reinterpreted and mythologised by the boys and shaping their ideas about themselves and their community.

Alexander wants naturally to show how human the 'folk devils' are. Although the boys' lives were marked by violence, encounters with the police and other crises, they emerge as understandable and often likeable. Alexander admits that to achieve this, and to avoid the stereotypical association of youth with crisis, she at times deliberately avoided detailed consideration of drug taking and criminal activity.



QUESTIONS

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

- 1 What events contributed to the media moral panic about Asian gangs?
- 2 Why were the media able to label Bengali young men as 'folk devils'?
- 3 Identify some of the problems faced by Bengali boys growing up on the Stoneleigh estate.
- 4 Why did Alexander choose SAYO as the focus of her study?
- 5 How did she become accepted by the boys?
- 6 How did the idea of the Asian gang influence the school's treatment of the boys?

ANALYSIS

- 7 Why have sociology text books on crime not considered the behaviour of young Asian men until recently?
- 8 Compare the moral panic on Asian gangs with any other moral panic you have studied. What similarities and differences are there?
- 9 Why did Alexander avoid detailed consideration of drug taking and criminality, and how does this affect your assessment of her findings?
- 10 In what ways does this research project illustrate the often deeply personal involvement of ethnographers in their research?

References: Modood, T., Berthoud, R., Lakey, J., Nazroo, J., Smith, P., Virdee, S. and Beishon, S., (1997) *Ethnic Minorities in Britain: Diversity and Disadvantage*, London, Policy Studies Institute