Living Research One: Why are we doing this? Public sociology and public life

This short section is a conversation between an activist involved in the project¹ and a member of the research team. Each reflects candidly on the value of the MIC project to civil society and on social research (and socially engaged research) in general as a ‘public good’.

**Sukhwant:** Personally, I was motivated to get involved in the Mapping Immigration Controversy project because of a sense of frustration with the way that immigration was being discussed by politicians and the media. There seemed to be a cross-party consensus on the need to restrict immigration. There was almost no public or media attention to the specific experiences of people subject to immigration controls. My personal engagement also carried an investment and commitment to anti-racism, a belief that as academics we have a role in highlighting discriminatory and dehumanising practices and policies and in challenging these. And conducting the AARX² surveys was a way to collate information about the experiences of local people and to engage them in a conversation about their views, which aren’t always obvious – as we discovered at the last general

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¹Southall Black Sisters (SBS) is a not-for-profit organisation, established in 1979 to meet the needs of Black (Asian and African-Caribbean) women. It aims to highlight and challenge all forms of gender-related violence against women; and to empower women to gain more control over their lives, live without fear of violence and assert their human rights to justice, equality and freedom. SBS were our research partners, helping us with the fieldwork in Ealing and Hounslow.

²Action Against Racism and Xenophobia is a group of academics and activists who came together to conduct ‘flash research’ into the impacts of the Go Home vans, as a precursor to the Mapping Immigration Controversy research project.
election [2015], we tend to surround ourselves with others that hold similar views. What prompted Southall Black Sisters to want to participate in the AARX survey and then to become one of the community partners in the Mapping Immigration Controversy bid? And why did you think it would be valuable to involve the SBS support group in the focus group sessions?

**Southall Black Sisters**: The research was timely. For us, it was part of a process that had already started at SBS. The London borough of Ealing was one of the areas where the Go Home vans were piloted. Alongside that, women using the [Southall Black Sisters] centre were telling us about the stops and checks taking place at the local train station. We were hearing from them that there had been an increase in the number of immigration raids within the local area. So we were already discussing this with users of the centre. The research enabled the women to see their own experiences as connected to others around the country. Also, we saw our involvement in the research as part of our wider community work; it became a particularly good example of this. Immigration is a toxic issue and we know from the two public meetings that we then organised jointly with you and the MIC team that the local community is divided on this issue. After all, this is a deprived area and it is easy for people to blame each other. The research was one way of doing sustained community work, of flagging those divisions and challenging them. In a sense it was a form of community cohesion work\(^3\) – whatever we might think of the government’s cohesion agenda, when we are questioning and challenging divisions within local communities we are doing cohesion work. These events had a unifying effect, they enabled the coming together of people within local areas.

**Sukhwant**: You referred there to the users of your centre, can we talk a bit about their engagement with the fieldwork? I found it really enlightening, right through from the surveys to the focus groups to the public meetings. People had so much to say on this issue. And they supplied valuable insights into the incidence of immigration raids and stops and checks, including new information about people being stopped at particular bus stops and outside usual office hours, the sorts of times where ethnic minorities will be working the early morning, late evening or night shifts. Things we may have suspected but didn’t know were happening. And I felt the data collated here

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\(^3\)‘Community cohesion’ became important in UK local and national government from 2001, as an attempt to redefine ‘multiculturalism’ (see Jones, 2013).
[at the SBS centre], through the focus groups, gave rise to some of the key themes within the MIC findings, especially the point that the Home Office and media campaigns were exacerbating divisions within local communities and local people are distinguishing between immigrants that they consider to be deserving and undeserving of support.

**Southall Black Sisters:** Yes! If you remember, one of the focus group sessions was fairly coherent and women had the opportunity to share their personal experiences, fears and concerns and to support each other. And the focus group session gave them a voice, it allowed them to say for themselves the massive impact immigration rules were having on their daily lives. Up until then, there had not been many spaces to highlight these impacts or to record their daily lived experiences. But the second focus group session reflected local tensions and hostilities – there were lots of references to ‘us’ and ‘them’, points about the worthiness of some immigrants and not others. That second session took place in the context of heightened UKIP mobilisation against Eastern Europeans and some of that anti-Eastern European sentiment was expressed by participants in that session.

For us, getting involved in the MIC research was part of a process, a continuation of work we were already doing with service users. And after the focus group sessions we continued some of those debates – as a follow-up to the points made at the second focus group, we organised a debate on the elections and political parties and we did a lot of work on building understanding and empathy towards all migrants, to encourage users of the centre to understand that anti-immigrant sentiment is not just impacting on them but on other communities as well.

**Sukhwant:** I do have a question in my mind though; even I as a researcher wonder how much impact we have actually had, beyond awareness raising and discussion among the research participants. The European elections [2014] and the subsequent national election results [2015] seem to have wholeheartedly supported the anti-immigrant hostility of that period. And here in the UK, the government did bring in the Immigration Act 2014, irrespective of opposition and projects like ours giving voice to their divisive and undemocratic nature. And, although the two public meetings in Southall were really well attended and we had an excellent discussion, I had the sense that we were talking to the ‘already converted’. There were just two voices that contrasted with what speakers on the panel were saying – the man at the first meeting that wanted to make a strong distinction between recent migrants allegedly claiming welfare benefits and the work ethic of his parents’ generation. Then
there was the man at the second meeting, where we discussed the MIC project findings, who said he could not understand why a focus on ‘illegal’ immigrants would impact on established ethnic minority communities. But these were minority views at the public meetings. Did you see any value in these events and what is your sense of the impact that we had?

Southall Black Sisters: But it gave us space to make the connections. For example, to hear from the JCWI [Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants] speaker about the work going on in Birmingham around landlord checks. We heard about the rise and fight across the country as well as the compliance. You make connections and build support, solidarity among dissenting voices. We heard about the disparate ways that people are protesting. In fact our contact with Rita Chadha⁴ came through all this. None of us were aware of Rita’s fantastic work and she is such an important voice. Also, we can’t look at ‘impact’ as something that will completely overhaul all these things. The anti-immigrant push is like a juggernaut! It has been layer upon layer of anti-immigration measures. Some of the measures in the current Crime Bill are like the pass laws of apartheid South Africa – if this goes through, it will allow the police to stop people not just on suspicion that you might not legally be in this country but to ask for your documents and if you can’t produce them within the stipulated time then be able to arrest you. They don’t even have to have reasonable suspicion, just suspicion.

Sukhwant: So even more likely to involve racial profiling.

Southall Black Sisters: Yes. And you don’t even have to give a good reason. The combination of this and the new measures under the Immigration Act have created levels of fear among people because landlords etc. are being encouraged to report people. So in that climate, where minorities are treading on eggshells, all of this work is so, so important because it’s about trying to create alternative networks. The anti-immigrant push is a tidal wave, it’s a juggernaut!

⁴Throughout the MIC research project Rita Chadha was Chief Executive of RAMFEL (Refugee And Migrant Forum of Essex and London). RAMFEL was a community partner for the research in Barking and Dagenham. Prior to the research project, Rita was a prominent voice opposing the Go Home van in local and national media and active in the AARX survey (see note ²), and RAMFEL supported one of their clients to make a successful legal challenge to the Go Home van initiative (see Taylor, Gidda and Syal, 2013).
And all we can do is create spaces for discussion and networks that challenge those views. One other very real impact is that the next time when one of the women in the focus group sees an Eastern European she won’t be so hardened in her views.

**Sukhwant**: Did it do that? Did it change the views of the women within the groups?

**Southall Black Sisters**: Yes, yes. We were doing the Everyday Borders project\(^5\) at the same time and that helped as well. That period, the series of discussions, was a good opening for us to discuss what all of us, local people can do. And it was important for creating alternative networks of support. Networks are vital, not only for individual women to overcome some of their fears and sense of isolation, but also for us as an organisation to link with other groups working around the country.

**Sukhwant**: Is that why SBS are involved in a number of social research projects?

**Southall Black Sisters**: Yes but there is a reason that this particular project has been unique – we are not encouraging, carte blanche, all academics to come and knock on our door [laughs]. This project was unique because women had already had a spontaneous protest outside the Himalaya Palace and then organised a demonstration outside the reception centre in Hounslow. These actions helped to galvanise individual feelings into a collective sentiment. It focused attention on a pressing issue. It generated a public debate. And that is the context in which the research comes along. It’s not like the research has manufactured something. It’s not like the research, or SBS workers for that matter, are manufacturing it. We were all supporting women that wanted to do something about it. And the research offered to map what was happening around the country. And it also gave us spaces for self-reflection. Activism teaches research what the issues are but academics may help us understand the processes and to develop our analysis of all this. That self-reflection is always a necessary part of activism. Research gives you a chance to step back and think about what has gone on, to connect your input with what other people are doing around the country. But it doesn’t work when researchers just swan in, in an instrumental way. We have

\(^5\)Research conducted at the University of East London between 2013 and 2016 as part of the EU Borderscapes project; see Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy, 2016.
that experience all the time, where academics just want us to organise the focus groups and ask the women to discuss a particular issue, without context or process, then it becomes manufactured. And there is also the question of payment.

**Southall Black Sisters:** One, staff time and staff resources that are taken up when we engage with research and that needs to be recognised. Secondly, it’s the women’s time and researchers need to recognise that they don’t have any money, especially those subject to immigration controls. Researchers tend to think they can just come along and do this session and take the data and go away and write up. But the women need to be reimbursed, as they were on this project. The fact that they are giving up their time and they are travelling in especially, all this needs to be taken into account. But the other thing that happened, and this is an important offshoot that has made this research project unique, is that the same women then decided to get involved in UEL [University of East London]’s Everyday Borders project and that process that they started on the MIC project continued. That was really empowering, it helped their confidence and a couple eventually went on to speak at public events about their experiences.

**Sukhwant:** That is great to hear! The focus groups were so powerful, really comprehensive discussions. I can see how your activism and the data have contributed to the project but have you learned or gained anything from us?

**Southall Black Sisters:** We can say for sure that being part of this helped us to reflect on what was happening. We spoke at a couple of the events and two of us also co-authored the *New Left Project* blogs with you and Yasmin.\(^6\) And we valued the joint production of these intellectual outputs – that is real partnership, not parachuting in collating data and exiting again. And I’ll tell you what that helped us to do, it helped us to develop our own thinking – key points that we aired for the first time at the Westminster Breakfast Briefing.\(^7\) It

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\(^6\) Dhaliwal and Patel, 2015; Gunaratnam and Patel, 2015.

\(^7\) An event held by the MIC project to share our interim research findings with policy-makers and activists in March 2015, at which Pragna Pratel from SBS gave a response to the findings and the ongoing research.
helped us articulate the view that this drive on immigration, this ‘hostile environment’ (and all the duties being foisted on statutory agencies and local people), this drive contradicts the protection principle and public policy/practice guidelines that remind public sector workers that they have a duty to protect women and children from violence and abuse. We had been thinking and discussing these points but the spaces around the project helped us to consolidate some of that thinking. And in fact the research project bolstered the position of SBS as well. Campaigning on immigration, in Southall particularly, has historically been led by BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] men while there have been few voices from the women’s voluntary sector questioning and challenging immigration rules. For us, getting involved in that space was important and the research project gave us legitimacy in this respect – we were involved in the work, so no one could say ‘well who are you, how do you know what is going on?’ And the events embedded our group in community structures and processes. And it’s really important that people can see a women’s group playing a part in the networks and spaces that have arisen as a consequence of the range of activities that are challenging the intensification of anti-immigrant policies and views. This is as important for migrant rights networks to see this as it is for other women’s groups to see. And for each section to connect the issues across race and gender and class. Women’s groups like Sandhya’s group – Sisters 4 Safety – in Manchester have felt isolated and academia can play a role in countering that isolation by linking them into what else is happening around the country.

Has reading this conversation made you think any differently about how academic researchers might work with community and activist groups? If so, in what ways?

When planning a research collaboration between academic researchers and community or activist groups, what issues might you consider with regard to:

1. Benefits of the relationship (to the community or activist group, to the participants, to the researcher)
2. Costs of the relationship (to the community or activist group, to the participants, to the researcher)
3. Ethics
4. Relationships
5. Clarity of roles
6. What happens after the fieldwork finishes?
References


