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Jon Garland and Neil Chakraborti
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‘Protean times?’: Exploring the relationships between policing, community and ‘race’ in rural England

JON GARLAND AND NEIL CHAKRABORTI
University of Leicester, UK

Abstract

Rural villages are often portrayed as problem-free, idyllic environments characterized by neighbourliness and cultural homogeneity. Drawing upon the growing body of research into issues of rural racism, this article challenges these prevailing notions by highlighting some of the problems associated with the increasing ethnic diversity of rural populations. The article begins by addressing the symbolic importance given to the English countryside by many of its white inhabitants, and assesses how this is related to romanticized feelings of national identity, ‘localism’ and narrow invocations of village ‘communities’. It is argued that village space is not neutral but is instead racialized and contested, and that it is feelings of insecurity among white rural populations, exacerbated by the presence of a markedly different ‘other’, that results in the marginalization of minority ethnic groups from mainstream community activities. It is also suggested that these groups are often subjected to racist victimization, which can go unrecognized by local agencies. This clearly has implications for policing diversity in the rural, and the article explores ways in which the public police (and other rural agencies) could begin to develop a more nuanced understanding of the diversification of rural space and the ‘othering’ of outsider populations.

Key Words

community • identity • policing • racism • rurality
Introduction

Popular constructions of rural England have perpetuated images of idyllic, problem-free environments, which have tended to mask the exclusionary processes that marginalize particular groups of rural ‘others’. This includes minority ethnic ‘others’ whose experiences of racism in the English rural have been largely overlooked by politicians, by local authorities and within criminology more broadly. These idyllic [mis]conceptions of rurality, together with the propensity for researchers to direct their attention towards environments with larger minority ethnic communities, have left the subject of rural racism as something of an unknown quantity, a problem whose nature, extent and impact remains for the most part marginalized from mainstream debate. Consequently, while the ensuing urban-centric discourse on ‘race’ issues has led to a range of developments in the context of challenging racist prejudice, the question of whether, and if so how, these developments can be applied to the rural has tended to be overlooked.

While the issue of ‘race’ has been neglected somewhat in this context, other forms of marginalization in the rural have been acknowledged more explicitly; indeed, research conducted mainly by rural geographers and sociologists into the social and spatial complexities surrounding ideas of rural ‘community’ has helped to cast doubt upon the relevance of traditional representations of the rural, and has instead drawn attention to the extent to which such representations have been used as exclusionary devices to decide who does and does not belong in the English countryside (Cloke and Little, 1997). In highlighting the experiences of a range of ‘other’ rural voices, much of this research has examined the concepts of poverty and class as definitive features in rural imagery used to benefit disproportionately the middle-classes at the expense and exclusion of the less affluent and mobile (see, for example, Philo, 1992; Cloke, 1997; Murdoch and Day, 1998). This body of research has also highlighted the way in which idyllicized constructions of the rural are instrumental in shaping patriarchal gender relations by trivializing the activities of women except where they are seen to relate to the provisioning and sustenance of the male-headed household (Francis and Henderson, 1992; Little and Austin, 1996). Similar suggestions have also been made with reference to the social positioning of gay identities in the rural, where the ‘othering’ of gay communities has been seen as integral to the maintenance of traditional rural values (Kirkey and Forsyth, 2001).

During the last decade, however, the study of ‘race’ and racism within the framework of the rural has developed significantly. Following on from Eric Jay’s groundbreaking study of the experience of minority ethnic populations in the west of England in the early 1990s (Jay, 1992) there has been a considerable growth in the amount of empirical research conducted on related issues in various rural areas across the UK. Most of these have been relatively small scale, focusing upon the situation in a particular location such as north Norfolk (Malcolm, 2000), south Wales (Robinson and Gardner, 2004) or the
Highlands of Scotland (de Lima, 1999), and have centred around the experiences of victims of racism and the types of harassment they have faced. Others, such as Pugh (2004) or Bhopal (2006), have examined the variety and effectiveness of the provision of services to minority ethnic rural residents. Some, including the authors of this article (Chakraborti and Garland, 2004a) or Neal and Agyeman (2006a), have sought to draw the various disparate studies together in order to provide a more holistic, national picture of the diverse formulations of rural racism and the success of local responses to the problem.

These studies have helped to add a new dimension to the broader study of racism by emphasizing the importance of the context of the rural in shaping conditions in which prejudice and racist victimization can feature. The influence of notions of Englishness and their association with the countryside has been significant in shaping attitudes that lead to the marginalization of incomers (see, for example, Cloke, 2004), and this will be explored in further detail later. Similarly, the belief that the countryside is a ‘crime free’ and safe environment has been seen to instil a certain wariness of urban incomers on the part of rural residents who fear that they are ‘bringing’ crime and its associated problems into their secure locale (Neal, 2002).

Interestingly, however, these studies have occurred at a time when the rural itself has experienced a series of high-profile ‘crises’ that reflect the process of change that it is undergoing. As Neal and Agyeman (2006a) reflect, soaring house prices, transport problems, the poor provision of welfare services and a lack of decent recreational facilities are beginning to change popular conceptions of the rural as a place that is somehow sheltered from the problems that afflict modern, urban locations. Other significant events, such as the national outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 2001, the criminal conviction of Norfolk farmer Tony Martin in 2000 1 or the shock arrival of avian influenza at a poultry farm in Suffolk in 2007, have made national headlines and have been ‘signal’ events (Innes, 2004) that have challenged idyllicized views of village life.

It is within this framework that this article addresses the interdependent relationships between notions of rural community and ideas of nationhood (and specifically Englishness), and assesses how these can create boundaries that exclude ‘outsiders’ or those perceived to be different. Drawing from the emerging body of work on issues surrounding rural racism, the article argues that, in order to provide services that are of genuine benefit to minority groups, rural agencies such as the police must understand the complicated and changing relationship between ideas of rural identity and community, and how these can in turn feed into exclusionary and prejudicial actions. Beginning with analyses of formulations of community and identity in the rural, the article asserts that perceptions of the rural as ‘quintessentially English’, friendly and relaxed are still prevalent among many white rural residents. These misconceptions often mask the intolerant nature of some rural communities who can exude a wariness of ‘incomers’ that marginalizes those
perceived to be different, including minority ethnic incomers. Indeed, such incomers can be the recipients of abuse and harassment that all too frequently can be flavoured with racist sentiment and vitriol.

However, it is argued here that the effectiveness of police and other agency responses to racist victimization can be undermined by complacent or ignorant beliefs about its prevalence in the countryside that can cause issues of racism to be ignored or disregarded. The authors propose that, like rural white populations more generally, the police are also influenced by the dominant depiction of the rural as a ‘white landscape’ and that they must understand the complex diversity of the rural if their provision of services to victims is to improve. The service must also comprehend that the countryside is evolving in terms of its composition, and that the problem of rural racism is evolving with it.

Methods

Throughout this article reference is made to the authors’ own research, which was conducted over a four-year period across rural towns and villages based within three English counties: Suffolk, Northamptonshire and Warwickshire. The research in each of these areas was designed primarily to examine relationships between established white rural communities and minority ethnic ‘incomers’, to identify the nature, extent and impact of racist victimization, and to assess the effectiveness, or otherwise, of local agency responses to issues of rural racism.

Similar methodologies were employed in the respective locations, and an important preliminary feature of each study was the undertaking of a postal questionnaire survey of rural minority ethnic households, designed to assess respondents’ views on a range of quality of life issues, including perceived problems in their local neighbourhood, levels of concern about, and experiences of, racist victimization, reasons for reporting, or not reporting, racist incidents and satisfaction with local agencies. Over 250 responses were received in total from the respective research sites, and although questionnaires in themselves provide only limited information, and hence partial insights into people’s perceptions and the process of victimization (Malcolm, 2000), it was felt that distributing questionnaires would at least facilitate the process of making contact with hard-to-hear and hard-to-reach households and help to indicate the types of key issues to be further explored during the qualitative phase of the research.

This qualitative phase included a total of 60 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with rural minority ethnic households based within the three counties, undertaken as a way of gaining a deeper appreciation of the various facets of exclusion and racist victimization from those with direct experience of these issues. As a way of establishing a representative selection of victims in terms of their demographic profile and experiences of racism, interviewees were chosen on the basis of recommendations from local agencies and through
identification via questionnaire responses. The victims involved in each study were evenly distributed in terms of gender, and drawn from a broad cross-section of visible and non-visible minority ethnic communities, rural areas of residence and age groups. A further feature of the methodology employed in each county was the undertaking of interviews and focus groups with members of established white rural communities. Long-term rural residents will almost inevitably have prevailing cultural and geographical imaginations of what rural life should be comprised of (Cloke et al., 1998), and drawing out these constructions of rurality from the more established ‘insiders’ of rural society can provide valuable insights into how minority ethnic ‘outsiders’ are perceived and into the processes of exclusion that can work to marginalize minority ethnic households from their wider rural communities. A total of 10 focus groups and 12 interviews were conducted in total, all arranged through contacts within local organizations and comprising of individuals of different ages, genders and fields of employment.

In addition, 60 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with individuals from a selection of organizations that have some degree of responsibility for policy-making and service provision for local communities in the three counties. Assessing the perceptions of key stakeholders was regarded as an important feature of the research that would enable interviewees to express their own opinions on the quality of available services, while providing insights into the realities of inter-agency working practice. Not surprisingly, this component of the research provided insights into a range of issues relating to rural service provision, partnership networks and community safety strategies, and although this article focuses chiefly on the public police, it should be acknowledged that the research findings have implications for a much broader range of agencies involved in the policing of diversity in the rural (for a more detailed discussion, see Garland and Chakraborti, 2003).

Identity, community and Englishness

In any discussion of policing racism in rural environments it is important initially to understand the unique nature and characteristics of the English rural in which it occurs. Despite the widespread industrialization and urbanization that has affected the majority of the English population during the past century, the rural has maintained a long-standing strong association with English national identity. When conceived in such a way, the rhetoric of rurality has the capacity to evoke powerful feelings of patriotism and nationalism characterized, for instance, by images of ‘England’s green and pleasant land’ (Milbourne, 1997: 95), which serve further to reinforce dominant stereotypes. By drawing parallels between rural and national identity, constructions of the rural have sought to highlight the ‘timeless’ and ‘quintessential’ national virtues that constitute a priceless part of the nation’s heritage (Murdoch and Pratt, 1997; Sibley, 1997). Such constructions have prevailed despite the
growing recognition afforded to multiple conceptions of identity, which cast
doubt upon the relevance, and indeed the validity, of singular notions of
nationalism.

During the authors’ interviews and discussions with white rural residents in
the various research sites, a number of themes repeatedly came up centring
around ideas of ‘the powerful and emotive’ concept of local rural commu-
nities ‘where everybody knows and cares for each other’ (Francis and
Henderson, 1992: 19). Most of those interviewed stated that their village com-
munities were both welcoming to incomers and yet also ‘close-knit’, with
everyone seemingly knowing everyone else and looking out for each other.
The key components of this notion—familial ties, long-term residency (includ-
ing the ability to trace one’s ancestral roots back several generations) and a
low turnover of population—are reflected in Abram’s findings that those rural
residents she studied in Buckinghamshire saw their village ‘as a timeless place
of long-established families forming a stable core of “real community”’ (2002:
82). Thus ‘real community’ in the eyes of some rural people has an ‘ageless’
quality, as though the village itself is ‘frozen’ in time and located in a mytho-
logized, perhaps even pre-war, era of stability and tranquillity (Neal and
Agyeman, 2006a). However, as Abram notes, the downside of this idyllicized
vision is that the ‘long-established’ residents she interviewed did not welcome
the presence of new villagers who arrived as part of a housing development,
with one of them commenting: ‘Everybody in the queue in front of you at the
fête is [now] a stranger. It’s rather as if you’ve moved’ (2002: 81).

As Hubbard contends, this fear of difference, whether racialized or in some
other form, reflects a view of the English rural consisting of ‘safe, family spaces
[that are] … unsullied, sexually pure and white, [with] urban environments
imagined as multicultural, permissive and spoiled’. Thus the ‘wholesome,
secure and monocultural’ countryside is contrasted with the ‘crime-ridden,
insecure and “black”’ (2005: 3) city that is seen as the seat of contemporary
ills and disorders. Nevertheless, and despite an apparent belief in the rural as
the seat of toleration, white rural residents in fact more closely resemble
Bauman’s ‘afraid and anxious individuals’ (2001: 15), whose insecurities and
fears of imagined external threats result in an individual mindset that more
closely resembles a ‘drawbridge’ mentality that is persistently and systemati-
cally wary of outsiders. This mentality is tacitly shared by village residents
who form what Bauman terms a ‘peg community’: an imagined community
identity that offers ‘collective insurance against individually confronted uncer-
tainties’ (2001: 15). The formation of such communities may not be openly
stated or acknowledged by its members, but their existence acts as a form of
reassurance to individual households that there are others who share their
worries and feel the same about how to safeguard their way of life.

These imagined rural communities (Anderson, 1991) feature a ‘national
and racial romanticism’ (Bonnett, 2000: 36) in many rural residents’ minds
that is the embodiment of white, English middle-class values and ideals.
These notions are held almost wilfully in defiance of the apparent ethnic
diversification of the countryside and may even be strengthened by it.
Therefore the village’s quintessential nature—family-orientated, heterosexual, secure and crime-free, decent, private and tolerant, conservative and, of course, overtly white—needs to be protected from the threat of dilution by the presence of the ‘other’. However, the effect of conflating notions of rurality with racialized ideas of Englishness is to create a situation in which it is very difficult for those who are not white and English to be accepted as part of this identity (Billig, 1995).

**Racialized ‘othering’ in the countryside**

Whether village activities are centred around the church, the village hall or the local pub, they are almost invariably steeped in white, English rural traditions that are inherently difficult for those from other backgrounds to penetrate (Garland and Chakraborti, 2004). Church-based events will obviously alienate those from other faiths, while those who do not drink alcohol will also find it hard to engage in social drinking on a Friday night or Sunday lunchtime in the local pub, for example. During the authors’ own research a number of minority ethnic interviewees referred to the tacit pressure that exists in such close-knit communities to ‘fit in’, feeling a compelling pressure towards conformism that is heightened for anyone perceived to be somehow different (see Giddens, 1994). For those who do make an attempt to participate in village life, however, the outcome may not be the one that they anticipated, as one mixed heritage interviewee based in north Warwickshire explained to the authors of this article:

> Pubs are no-go zones. In one village nearby there is this really nice pub that does good food, and I remember me and my dad walked in once and it was, ‘Oh there are Asian people in our pub, we don’t serve curry here, surely they don’t want to eat white food here?’

The interviewee was therefore caught in a ‘no-win’ situation whereby they risked being ostracized if they did not go to the pub but caused annoyance if they did. This kind of intolerance was noted in the recollections of both white and minority ethnic research participants, and the fact that someone’s visible difference can cause anxieties and concerns in environments where white communities are simply not familiar with such difference is indicated within the following research quotation, taken from an interview with a white female schoolteacher from north Warwickshire:

> I always think back to the very first, umm, ethnic girl that I had in a class, and no-one knew how to refer to her. They were sort of saying ‘Well, it’s, er, you know the one I mean: the little girl in the red cardigan’.

The schoolteacher’s words here reveal the awkwardness that can surround issues of ‘race’ in predominantly white areas where well-meaning people are often unused to the presence of people of colour and are consequently unsure of the correct language to use when referring to them. In this example,
the teacher and her colleagues apparently felt that it was wrong to refer to the child’s ethnicity, as if this was somehow racist, and so instead referred to her non-physical characteristics as a way of differentiating her from the other children.

As various studies of rural racism have confirmed (see, for instance, de Lima, 2001; Robinson and Gardner, 2004; Chakraborti and Garland, 2004b), this inherent unfamiliarity with, and fear or mistrust of, the ‘other’ commonly provides the basis for the routine, so-called ‘low-level’ harassment or abuse experienced by rural minority ethnic households, examples of which can include instances of name-calling, intimidatory staring, stone-throwing, ‘knock-down ginger’, neighbour disputes and racist graffiti. Indeed, past research into racist victimization (for example Bowling, 1999; Clancy et al., 2001) has suggested that racist harassment should be regarded as an ongoing process rather than as a series of unconnected events; a standpoint which helps to promote recognition of the continual and multi-faceted problem of racism and its cumulative impact upon the day-to-day existence of rural minority ethnic households. Though upsetting enough when taken in isolation, these examples of victimization can be all the more harrowing by the fact that they are likely to be simply part of a continuum of racism experienced by rural minority ethnic households in all sorts of different private and social situations, some expressions of which may be more graphic and less latent than others. While there is not the room nor scope in this article to go into detail regarding the nature and extent of rural racism (see Chakraborti and Garland, 2004b), the experiences outlined in the following, taken from interviews with an Indian female and then an Indian male, both from south Warwickshire, were typical of many of the incidents uncovered by the authors during their own research:

One girl about 18 years old was just bullying her [interviewee’s daughter] all the time, and at that time she was only seven … Saying things like ‘You can’t use the slides, you can’t do this, you lot are dirty people, go and take a bath.’ Calling her all sorts of swear words, ‘Paki’, ‘Nig-nog’ … She’d start crying and come back to the house, and they [the bullies] just followed her making all sorts of racial comments. That type of incident happened so many times.

The new problem seems to have arrived after this 9/11 incident in America. People get confused about our identity, whether he is a Sikh or he is a Muslim, and there is now always some bad feeling in the air.

The latter quotation reveals a fascinating aspect of the post-9/11 climate. Not only does it show that global events can impact upon the lives of people living in rural and isolated areas of England, but it also suggests that the increase in harassment or abuse directed at Muslim communities has affected other South-East Asian minority ethnic groups with respect to their perceived and actual risk of racist victimization (Kennedy, 2007). In line with the suggestions of a number of other writers (see, for instance, Tyler, 2004; Ashworth, 2005; Parris, 2005) the authors’ research highlighted that heightened fears over the threat of Islamic terrorism, and the ensuing
growth in anti-Islamic sentiment, had created problems not just for Muslim households but also for people from other backgrounds who had experienced an increased and sustained level of what they took for mistakenly-directed Islamophobic abuse on the basis of their ostensibly ‘Asian’ characteristics such as skin colour, beard growth or the wearing of a turban.

At the same time though, the situation may be rather more complicated than conveyed through simply attributing these problems to an ‘intolerance of difference’. For instance, a number of rural minority ethnic households taking part in the authors’ research suggested that the effects of being ‘othered’ could be tempered by social status, and especially if the values and norms of minority ethnic residents were compliant with those of white middle-class communities. In the more affluent villages within the authors’ research areas it appeared in some cases that so long as minority ethnic households conformed to certain standards of behaviour that were expected of them, then they would be tolerated or even accepted within the community. As a district councillor in south Warwickshire explained to the authors: ‘The ethnic minorities we have got are well-educated professionals, therefore they’re not perceived as spongers off the State or anything like that. They’re really part of the community.’ There is, of course, more than a hint of class snobbery about such attitudes, which serves to exclude those from minority ethnic backgrounds who are unemployed or in ‘low-status’ occupations. These attitudes also reveal the complexities of the othering process, and suggest that the rural ‘other’ can take many forms. Even if ‘accepted’, it is suggested here that this is often conditional and can be dependent upon (among other things) social class, sexuality, employment status and religion. It is also dependent upon ethnicity, for it seems that some ethnic groups are more marginalized than others, as the following quotation taken from a white rural resident in east Suffolk reveals:

If that house next door went up for sale, what would happen if a Black family moved in? They are the same as we are, I mean they eat the same food that we eat and you know, all the rest of it. But what about Pakistanis?

This interviewee had configured his own ‘boundary’ of acceptance to include those whom he considered sufficiently similar to his own cultural and behavioural norms but to exclude those he considered too ‘alien’. As Tyler (2006: 136) asserts, this can occur even when rural minority ethnic residents conform to certain white middle-class expectations of wealth and professional status, as they can be perceived to lack the necessary ‘cultural ingredients’ needed to fit into the ‘imagined cultural community’ of predominantly white villages.

Policing racist harassment in the increasingly diversified rural

As outlined above, there is a common perception in the English rural that the countryside is a ‘white landscape’ where there can be little, if any, racism due to its ethnically homogeneous population. The advent of minority ethnic
populations in the rural, so the argument goes, can therefore precipitate racism, with blame for such harassment apportioned upon the minority ethnic ‘incomers’ themselves rather than on white populations whose latent racism may not have previously manifested itself in overt forms. If the relative ethnic homogeneity remains undisturbed, so the logic goes, then the tranquillity of the countryside can be preserved.

Interestingly, however, as was seen earlier, the myth of the ‘white rural landscape’ persists among many village residents, including those that work for agencies that have responsibility for dealing with racist incidents. The authors’ own research, and that of others such as Dhalech (1999) or de Lima (2001), has shown that a ‘no racism here’ mentality commonly exists amongst key local agency workers in rural areas, including police officers, who assume that, as racist incidents do not appear in large numbers within official police statistics, then there simply cannot be a significant problem of racism in their area. For a substantial proportion of those officers interviewed by the authors, ‘race’ issues appeared to be of minor significance because they had little knowledge of, or contact with, local rural minority ethnic households, and this failure to identify the needs of such households would appear to be a major obstacle to the delivery of effective services (see also Magne, 2003).

Similarly, a lack of belief on the part of victims that the police would take their cases seriously also infused many interviewees’ views, echoing the wider concerns that minority ethnic communities do not have sufficient trust and confidence in the police service more generally (Rowe, 2004). As one female interviewee of mixed heritage from north Warwickshire stated:

It is probably a really cynical view but I honestly think they [the police] wouldn’t care, it’s just like, ‘Well I am sorry that someone called you a Paki, I will log that as job number 142 and I will file it in your file, and next time you come down we will get the file out and log it as job 143, you have been called Paki twice’ ...

This sense of mistrust was common to many of the minority ethnic research participants in the authors’ studies and was rooted in a number of factors, including victims’ previous bad experiences of the police; the failure of the police to resolve earlier racist incidents to the victims’ satisfaction; and victims’ concerns that the reporting of incidents would merely exacerbate already tense situations (see also Spalek, 2006). In the ‘tight-knit’ environment of rural villages outlined earlier, where everyone can know each others’ business and where isolated minority ethnic households ‘stand out’, it can become especially difficult for victims of harassment to challenge openly racism as they feel that they may become further isolated from the village community as a whole. Thus ‘turning a blind eye’ to incidents becomes a common response in the countryside as victims hope that, by ‘keeping their heads down’, the problem may somehow go away (de Lima, 2006; Garland and Chakraborti, 2006).

Some victims also felt that there was little point in reporting incidents to the police in cases where they thought that there was insufficient ‘hard evidence’ to present a solid ‘case’ to officers. Indeed, the authors’ own research
has shown that the most common forms of racist harassment in the rural (such as racist abuse and unnecessary staring) can pose particular problems for police officers who are used to dealing with discrete, one-off criminal events and thus may not understand the seriousness of a ‘low-level’ incident that, as mentioned earlier, could form part of a continuum of harassment that can be very damaging for the victim. Officers may therefore choose to resolve such incidents in a relatively ‘low-key’ and informal way that unfortunately may only ‘serve to maintain the ongoing process of … victimisation’ (Bowling, 1999: 280, cited in Rowe, 2004).

Minority ethnic households living in predominantly white areas may also prefer to be dealt with by officers who themselves are of a minority ethnic background (de Lima, 2001; Magne, 2003). While this should not be seen to suggest that only members of minority ethnic communities are able to understand, and therefore respond effectively, to episodes of racism, a frequent assertion among victims interviewed as part of the authors’ studies was that they would have welcomed an opportunity to disclose their experiences to someone with shared minority ethnic status as at least they would have been able to empathize more readily with the victims’ circumstances.

Another reason cited by those victims interviewed by the authors for not trusting the police was a feeling that the police hold stereotypical views about minority ethnic communities, seeing them as inherently criminogenic: views that the police more broadly have been accused of holding for several decades (Knepper, 2007) and rural forces more specifically in the last decade (Cloke, 2004). Indeed, a number of interviewees cited examples of when they felt they had been treated with suspicion, rather than with sympathy, when reporting racist incidents to officers, with some going as far as to suggest that investigating officers had been more concerned with trying to establish whether the victims had themselves committed offences rather than taking their experiences seriously. Others felt that officers simply did not have sufficient understanding of the situation facing a victim of racism and thus were acting out of ignorance rather than malice. Whether this ignorance is more prevalent among rural rather than urban forces is hard to gauge, but there is nevertheless a suspicion that a lack of knowledge of minority ethnic communities among officers in predominantly white constabularies, which themselves are based within overwhelmingly white areas, can only be a negative contributory factor to effective service delivery. As de Lima suggests, this ignorance could lead to officers feeling that: ‘minority ethnic groups did not have any needs because they were small in number, “invisible” and “silent” … [which] … were interpreted as “not willing to integrate” and therefore wishing to be left alone’ (2001: 48). This lack of knowledge may extend further than misplaced assumptions about the behaviour and cultures of rural minority ethnic populations and may also relate to the policies, practices and procedures for dealing with racist incidents when they occur. Magne (2003) has drawn attention to the lack of clarity that often exists within rural-based organizations with regards to race equality procedures and practice, and this problem was evident in each of the authors’ own research areas, with some
agency interviewees, for example, unable to recall whether any in-house policy documents or guidelines existed on issues of ‘race’ and diversity, while others admitted to not knowing their contents.

Interestingly, however, a number of the studies of rural racism discussed in this article have touched upon the already changing nature of rural populations—a relatively recent development that many of those interviewed for the authors’ own research were either reluctant to acknowledge or, if they did recognize the growing diversity of England’s countryside, were resentful of it. As Magne’s study of racism in Devon asserts, nationally the rural minority ethnic population increased by as much as 100 per cent during the 10 years from the 1991 census to that of 2001 (Magne, 2003: 3.1); a significant increase that highlights the growing presence in the countryside of the minority ethnic ‘other’. However, this trend merely reflects broader population movements in the last two decades or so. As Neal and Agyeman (2006b) state, there has been a considerable ‘repopulation’ of rural England as revealed by the Countryside Agency’s State of the Countryside report (Countryside Agency, 2004, cited in Neal and Agyeman, 2006b: 244), which observed a 14 per cent growth in the rural population between 1981 and 2002 compared to a corresponding 3 per cent increase in urban areas.

Arguably, the most significant population development for many rural communities has been the arrival of migrant workers from the new EU states such as Poland and Lithuania following the post-2005 European Union expansion. Indeed, some estimates suggest that the population of Norfolk and Suffolk can swell by as much as 80,000 during summer months as Eastern European migrants arrive to work on the summer fruit harvests (Chittenden and Haberson, 2005). Other migrant workers from poorer parts of EU states such as Portugal are also now employed in occupations previously the province of ‘traditional’ white working-class rural communities, such as labourers on poultry farms like that affected by avian influenza in 2007 (Smith et al., 2007). Interestingly though, research has illustrated how abusive language and behaviour directed towards these groups, and indeed other white minority groups such as Gypsies and Travellers, is not always equated directly with racism per se, in the way that such acts towards other ‘recognized’ minority ethnic groups would be (Hester, 1999; Chakraborti and Garland, 2004b; James, 2006). The failure to recognize properly racism directed towards undesirable forms of whiteness (Neal, 2002) in the rural has been documented more explicitly in recent years (see, for example, Hubbard, 2005; Bhopal, 2006; Hetherington, 2006) but rarely in a fashion that facilitates comparison of their experiences with those of other minorities in a particular locality or consideration of their interplay with rural agencies.

Clearly, then, the minority ethnic population in many rural areas is both growing and changing, and this presents new and problematic challenges for rural police forces. As McLaughlin (2007b) posits, white police officers need to have the skills, knowledge and understanding to be able to work within this new and protean environment. This capacity may though be limited by the ‘pivotal role … [that] “whiteness” has played in the nurturing and sustaining of both the formal and cultural identity of the British police’
(McLaughlin, 2007b: 38). In the rural context, the suggestion is that the influence and permeation of ideas of white Englishness into the ranks of officers may influence the development of policies, procedures and practice, and thus may contribute to the lack of effective service provision for victims of racism if this all-pervasive culture does not take their needs seriously.

Thus the rural demographic is more complex than many rural officers, including senior managers, may realize, and is becoming increasingly more so. Consequently from a rural policing perspective, while the importance of recognizing the needs of victims of racist harassment and abuse remains as significant as ever, there is a distinct possibility that, as the minority population in the countryside rises, so too will the problem feature more prominently in official police statistics, and as a result the police may feel more compelled to act, as indeed may other agencies and service providers. However, as Pugh argues, this urge to act should not come from a feeling of duty or a compulsion driven by statistical measurements, but rather through a moral obligation:

Challenging and responding to racism is not a matter of professional or personal discretion, it is a statutory duty and a professional obligation. There may well be room for the exercise of judgement and discretion in deciding how best to respond, but respond they must.

(2004: 178)

Conclusions: understanding the complexities of the changing countryside

As has been indicated in the preceding discussion, racist victimization in rural environments is a significant issue that has only recently begun to receive the attention that it deserves. While violent episodes are, thankfully, relatively rare, so-called ‘low-level’ incidents are more frequent and can be extremely distressing for the victim (Garland and Chakraborti, 2006). They can also leave the victim feeling ostracized from their local community; a minority ethnic ‘other’ who, either tacitly or openly, is made to feel unwelcome in their own village. It was argued earlier that much of this wariness of the ‘other’ in the minds of many white rural residents is based upon an association of minority ethnic people with crime-ridden and disorderly urban environments. Such an association stands in direct contradiction to the image of the countryside as safe and secure, free of crime, close-knit, welcoming and ethnically homogeneous, that has such resonance with many white inhabitants. This idea of the rural and its inhabitants is rooted in romantic and nostalgic notions of national identity that conflate Englishness with ‘whiteness’ and an ‘unsullied’ and ‘pure’ version of the countryside. It is also an idea that is becoming increasingly anachronistic in an era when, as was mentioned earlier, the rural has experienced a number of high-profile ‘crises’ that have tainted the notion of its inherently ‘idyllic’ nature. The increasing ethnic diversity of the countryside’s population is also challenging the suggestion that the rural is purely a ‘white landscape’.
However, while these arguments paint a fairly bleak picture of white-dominated rural communities it should be noted that the kind of exclusionary community identity apparently so cherished by many white rural dwellers is itself flawed in a number of ways, and not just because it is sourced in a ‘rose-tinted’ view of the past. As Hughes suggests, ‘communities defined by identity are themselves riven with division and tensions regarding their seemingly “essentialised” identities’ (2007: 65); differences that can be ‘conveniently’ overlooked by white rural populations looking for a sense of unity in reaction to the presence of a minority ethnic ‘other’.

It is thus in this context that the voices of victims of racism struggle to be heard and, as was noted earlier, this may be due to the low priority accorded to dealing with incidents by local police services. Indeed, the authors’ own research echoes the findings of others in that it repeatedly uncovered a belief held by many agency workers, including police officers, that racism was simply not an issue in rural areas where almost everybody was from one ethnic group. As Holdaway and O’Neill suggest, this could result in a whole host of assumptions on the part of white officers that may make them think, as an Assistant Chief Constable whom they interviewed suggested, that they: ‘know best and you know how to service them [minority ethnic communities], then you are perhaps inadvertently creating a whole lot of barriers that then affect those people’s opportunities, access and everything’ (2006: 362). This may be a reflection of Foster et al.’s (2005: 96) discovery that, of the eight case study areas that they evaluated for improvements to police diversity policy and practice in the years following the 1999 Macpherson Report, the rural force had made the least progress. It was felt that this force had thought that the findings of the Macpherson Report were relevant only to the Metropolitan Police Service or to other urban forces, and not to a rural force that in any case had a relatively small minority ethnic population. As McLaughlin contends, the police service needs to be ‘embedded within the “multi-social” fabric’ (2007a: 169) of an increasingly diverse society and yet also needs to realize that this does not just apply to the urban, but also to an increasingly multicultural rural.

Additional dimensions are outlined by Bhopal, who suggests in his study of Gypsy Traveller children in rural schools where there are few, if any, black or Asian children, that ‘racism is not seen to be an issue. The visibility of race is replaced with the invisibility of being a white “other” in an all-white school’ (2006: 205, emphases in original). He thus raises two important points: first, that racism is commonly discounted as being a serious issue in predominantly white institutions in the rural; and second, that the needs of white minority ethnic groups themselves can be overlooked as such groups do not ‘stand out’ in the way that those from visible minority ethnic groups do. This complex situation can be overlooked or misunderstood by agencies such as the police who do not acknowledge the importance of the local context to the development of policy and practice (Stewart, 2007) and who do not recognize the specificity of the rural. Similarly, agencies may view rural communities overly simplistically as being ethnically homogeneous or, even if they do have an understanding of the needs of visible minority ethnic populations, may
overlook white minorities, such as migrant workers from Eastern Europe or Gypsy Travellers, whose needs may be just as significant.

By misunderstanding the diverse nature of the ‘new countryside’ (Neal and Agyeman, 2006a) agencies may also overlook other less obvious sources of racism, such as migrant workers from Poland who themselves come from monocultural environments where racism is often endemic (Asthana and Fitzgerald, 2007). This, therefore, raises the possibility that the new, white minority ethnic ‘other’ in the countryside may victimize the more established, visible minority ethnic presence in the ever-changing countryside. The police, local authorities and other organizations need to be aware of these evolving complexities and adjust their policies and practices accordingly.

These mistakes can be avoided if racism is accorded its due importance by statutory and voluntary agencies in the countryside in the first place. Not to take racism seriously in predominantly white environments is to devalue its importance, for, as Karner argues, ethnicity ‘matters particularly in contexts of inequality between groups widely considered to constitute “the cultural majority” and those living as minorities respectively’ (2007: 100, emphasis in original). Unless and until agencies have a fully developed understanding of this, then victims of racist harassment in the rural will continue to be denied the service they need and deserve.

Notes

1 This case involved the shooting of teenage burglar Fred Barras by Norfolk farmer Tony Martin in 2000. This action, which earned Martin a jail sentence for manslaughter, exposed to the wider world the absence of available police cover in many rural areas during the hours of darkness (Ford, 2003).

2 The research in each county included interviews with people from the following ethnicities: black Caribbean; Indian; Pakistani; Bangladeshi; Chinese; black African; Irish; Iranian; mixed heritage; and Gypsy Traveller. In addition, the researchers interviewed an American family based in Suffolk, a Peruvian household based in Northamptonshire and two Kosovan youths in Warwickshire.

3 Interviewees included the following individuals and organizational representatives based in the three counties: race equality support officers; the Police (including senior representatives and probationers); youth workers; social services; Victim Support; district and parish councils; social services; citizens advice bureaux; local education authorities; Traveller education services; councils for voluntary service; primary care trusts; asylum and refugee groups; housing associations; and local councillors.

References


JON GARLAND is a lecturer in Criminology at the Department of Criminology, University of Leicester. His research interests include rural racism; ethnicity and identity; hate crime; animal rights activism; community safety; policing of minority ethnic groups; and football hooliganism.

NEIL CHAKRABORTI is a lecturer in Criminology at the Department of Criminology, University of Leicester. He has conducted extensive research into, and published widely on, issues of ‘race’, ethnicity and victimization, with a particular interest in hate crime; policing diversity; community cohesion; and fear of crime among minority ethnic communities.