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Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

In the preceding two chapters, we set out an extensive characterisation of public debates on the political and civic participation of ethnic minority young people. In evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of existing studies of the political engagement of black and minority ethnic groups, we noted both the absence of a youth dimension to much of the research on ethnic minorities’ political participation and the failure of studies of ethnic minority youth to pay heed to forms of political engagement in the contemporary period. In this respect, we argue that there is a mismatch between the extent of public concern over ethnic minority young people’s political and civic engagement on the one hand, and the paucity of data sufficient to uphold these concerns empirically on the other. These critical observations form the point of departure of our research, both conceptually and in terms of our research design. In this chapter, we outline how we designed our research to enable us to move beyond the confines of existing literature and debate. In particular, we specify the methodological implications of the theoretical perspective developed in Chapter 2, arguing for the need for research engagement across a range of spheres of participation, and for a qualitative approach that would allow deeper exploration of the forms of participation in which ethnic minority young people engage. Specifically, we provide an account of how we designed our study to be sufficiently flexible to explore a number of related themes, including young people’s views of and engagement with political institutions, their personal political biographies, the political issues that concerned them and their conceptions of how the local spaces and settings of their lives were implicated in political patterns and processes. This chapter sets out how broadly conceived notions of ‘participation’, ‘politics’ and
‘the political’ were operationalised within the study – particularly in relation to the sampling approach and the use of focus groups and interviews as the primary methods of generating our data. Here, we also explain the study’s concern with understanding the significance of place in relation to young people’s politics and account for the selection of Birmingham and Bradford as sites for the project’s fieldwork. The theme of how sites and spaces may be constitutive of ethnic minority young people’s politics introduced here is taken up more fully in Chapter 8.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the Section ‘Research design’, we outline our research design, setting out the research questions pursued in the project and how these emerged against the background of conceptual and data limitations evident in existing studies of youth, ethnicity and political participation; the details of our commitment to qualitative methodology and the sampling approach adopted; and the ethical and interpretive issues that emerged throughout the various stages of the research. In the Section ‘The role of place and space’, we give necessary background information on Birmingham and Bradford as the field study sites of the research, focusing on the key spatial and demographic considerations underpinning our work in the two areas. Finally, in the Section on ‘The sample’, we provide a detailed description of our sample, in terms of the range of groups included, and our respondents’ self-ascribed ethnicity, age, gender and occupation.

Research design

Research questions: the breadth of ‘the political’

As we discussed in Chapter 2, one consequence of the tendency to view young people as objects of political concern rather than as political subjects in their own right has been the neglect of the varied ways in which young people are politically active, often beyond the political mainstream. Correspondingly, there has been little attention paid to the routes and pathways young people – including those of ethnic minority heritage – have pursued into different forms of participation and the issues and concerns that have motivated them in doing so. In light of these observations, from the outset our research took a broad view of participation, encompassing attitudes and engagement expressed at a variety of levels, including community engagement, local area-based activity, national politics, international politics and single-issue campaign involvement. As we discussed in Chapter 2, our concern with including a focus on political engagement across these levels arose from our observations on the diverse range of democratic practices that have