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Sarah Neal and Eugene McLaughlin 'Researching Up? Interviews, Emotionality and Policy-Making Elites'

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### Abstract

This article recounts the methodological story of a qualitative research project that investigated the work of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain and the news media's deconstruction of the Commission's report - the Parekh Report - which was published on 11 October 2000. Our project used a multi-method fieldwork approach, combining textual analysis of news media coverage and the extensive documentary archives of the Commission, along with semi-structured interviews with Commissioners and other figures involved in the publication of the Report. The article attempts to offer a reflexive account of the experiences of interviewing a particular public policy-making elite and examines how a particular 'public trauma' - that is, the damaging political fall-out of extremely negative news media coverage of the Parekh Report - inflected our research encounters. We argue that the openness with which many of the participants spoke about this traumatic experience suggests that the production of policy documents can constitute highly emotional labour for participants. We extend this argument by examining how this openness also reveals the instabilities and uncertainties of power within the research interviewee/interviewer relationship. In this way the article seeks to contribute to debates about the problems of defining the category 'elites' in both public policy and social research worlds. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

### Introduction

It is something of an academic truism that the social science gaze has been predominantly cast downwards and disproportionately focused on vulnerable, powerless and 'problem' populations. In the early 1970s, Alexander Liazos captured this with his infamous designation of sociological studies of deviance as constituting a sociology of 'nuts, sluts and perverts'

(1972: 103). A decade later Maurice Punch noted that 'it is still painfully obvious . . . that researchers have rarely penetrated to the territory of the powerful and many field studies still focus on lowly, marginal groups' (1986: 25).

However, not only does a multi-disciplinary body of work concerned with the study of elite populations exist (Palmer, 2000; Cook *et al.*, 2002; Pimlott, 2002; Simon, 2002; Welch *et al.*, 2002; Davies, 2004; Ball, 2005; Glees *et al.*, 2006, for example), but alongside this is an expanding set of methodological accounts of the experiences of researching 'upwards' and engaging the seemingly powerful in the research process (see, for example, Smart, 1984; Moyser and Wagstaffe, 1987; Ball, 1993; Gerwitz and Ozga, 1993; Neal, 1995; Hertz and Imber, 1995; Walford, 1999; Cochrane, 1998; Ward and Jones, 1999; Duke, 2003; Desmond, 2004; Smith, 2006; Barnard *et al.*, 2007; Conti and O'Neil, 2007; Richards, 2007). This article represents a contribution to the existing literature through discussion of the qualitative techniques we used to investigate the production and publication of the *Parekh Report* on 11 October 2000. Our methodological narrative seeks to perform two related tasks. First, we explore the uncertain and unsettled cartographies of power that exist between the researcher and the elite interviewee in the research encounter. And, second, we examine the notion of the emotional investment that policy-makers may have in the documents they have produced and disseminated.

Our article is divided into three sections. First, we summarise the *Parekh Report* and the objectives and design of our research project. We then review accounts of power relationships in elite research and the related dilemma of defining what constitutes the category 'elites'. The third section of the article is concerned with the diverse ways in which policy-making can be understood as emotional labour. We draw on our data set and field-based descriptions of our interview encounters to evidence some of this emotionality. We argue that this emotionality can be identified in relation to senses of the personal investment in and senses of responsibility for the Report.

### **The *Parekh Report*: production, publication and reception**

The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain Commission consisted of 'distinguished individuals drawn from many community backgrounds and different walks of life and with a long record of active academic and practical engagement in race-related issues in Britain and elsewhere' (Commission for the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, 2000: viii). The Commission was

established by the Runnymede Trust in January 1998, having been inspired by and intended to rethink Jim Rose's seminal 1969 report *Colour and Citizenship*. It was chaired, in its final incarnation, by Professor Bhikhu Parekh, and included public figures such as Andrew Marr (formerly the BBC's political editor), Trevor Phillips (currently Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission), Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (journalist and commentator), Anne Owers (currently HM Chief Inspector of Prisons), Herman Ouseley (former head of the Commission for Racial Equality), as well as professors with expertise in race and ethnic relations from the universities of Bristol, Cambridge, London, Oxford, Warwick and the Open University. The Commission was the first time that many of these 23 individuals had chosen to work with each other in such a collective endeavour.

We describe the Commissioners as 'elite policy-makers'. While we return to the troubling questions surrounding the category 'elite' below, our attachment of the term 'policy-makers' to the Commissioners also requires explanation. Policy-making processes are by definition plural in nature in that they involve a range of actors and stakeholders, who function as a 'policy community'. As Bochel and Bochel note, 'in most areas of policy and decision making there are a variety of government departments or agencies, advisory bodies and pressure groups with interest in these areas, as well as other bodies or individuals who may be affected by the policies or issues' (2004: 58). In this context, the Commission constituted a distinctive policy community, specialising in race, multiculturalism and ethnicity. The membership of the Commission was carefully constructed. Some Commissioners were indeed policy experts and others were much more tangentially involved in policy fields, many had interconnected public biographies and overlapping social connections. With regard to how the Commission operated, it was a body mandated by the Runnymede Trust and its funders - the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the Nuffield Foundation and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation - to produce both an authoritative analysis of the state of the nation and perhaps more importantly, a rigorous policy paradigm that could be used by government departments to counteract racial discrimination and disadvantage. The Commission extended its policy network through consulting with a wide range of organisations, running focus groups, soliciting written submissions, commissioning papers from policy specialists and hosting expert seminars.

At heart, the *Parekh Report* was a policy text. It was constructed around six themes: rethinking the dominant British historical narrative and national identity; understanding that

all identities are in a process of transition; developing a balance between cohesion, equality and difference; addressing and eliminating all forms of racism; reducing material inequalities; and building a pluralistic human rights culture. Part One of the Report did concentrate on the broader theoretical issues. However, Part Two focused on operationalising its recommendations in various policy domains, and the final part outlined the role of government in providing strategic direction and resources. The report also identified policy areas and issues where vital research data were non-existent or inadequate. The political aspirations for the Report were expressed as follows: 'no other European country, nor even the US, has produced such a report. All discussions of multi-ethnic Britain from now onwards will have to take this as their basis' (Publisher's Press Release for Parekh Report, 2000).

The Commission also had close connections to the New Labour government. Although it was politically independent, the Commission was officially launched by Jack Straw, the then Home Secretary, on behalf of the government in February 1998. The Home Office received a draft copy of the *Parekh Report* three weeks before publication and it was received publicly on behalf of the government by Jack Straw on 11 October 2000. The proximity of the Commission and its report to the government explain why the news media storm that engulfed the Report was so damaging. The Report was caught between being associated with New Labour on the one hand and New Labour distancing itself from it on the other.

Across the gamut of news media formats - front-page headlines, editorials, features, commentaries, interviews, panel discussions and studio debates - the spotlight was on one short passage in the 417 page report which declared that 'Britishness, as much as Englishness, has systematic, largely unspoken, racial connotations'. The conservative newspapers, in particular, sledge hammered what became translated into this 'British is a *racist* word' section of the Report in almost identical terms and deployed their considerable discursive and illustrative resources to discredit the wider report and its key recommendations (McLaughlin and Neal, 2004). Negative mediatisation not only de-legitimised the *Parekh Report* but also undermined the policy credibility of the Commission and the Runnymede Trust, and tarnished the personal reputation of the Commissioners. In government policy arenas, the Report was transformed from being an 'inside-track' policy template for thinking through the future of multiculturalism, British national identity and diasporic citizenship to a politically untouchable document that was itself very much part of the contested policy terrain that it had sought to exercise control over.

## **The research project: focus and design**

The project used a multi-method fieldwork approach that combined textual analysis of news media coverage and the extensive documentary archive generated by the Commission during its two-year deliberation period. Predominantly though, the project relied on a series of semi-structured interviews with those directly involved in the Commission and in the publication of the *Parekh Report*. We spoke not only to Commissioners but also to figures in the Runnymede Trust, Profile Books (the publisher of the Report) and to Hobsbawm Macauley (the public relations firm that was employed by the Commission to launch the *Parekh Report*). The Runnymede Trust was our first point of research contact and it acted as a gatekeeper to the Commission. All the Commissioners were contacted through the Trust and those that were able and/or willing to be involved in the project then made contact with us directly. We did have a positive response rate, with many Commissioners expressing their approval of our project and its intentions. In total, we conducted 18 interviews. Thirteen of these were with Commissioners and five with figures closely related to the Report. One Commissioner wrote to us expressing his thoughts and experiences of being part of the Commission. One Commissioner withdrew from an arranged interview because of appointment to a high-level government post. We developed a strong sense that some of the Commissioners who did not respond to our approaches wanted to forget an extremely problematic experience. This was confirmed in the course of the conversations and interviews that did take place.

Our research project began in November 2002 and the majority of the fieldwork was completed by July 2004. Given that more than two years had elapsed since the *Parekh Report* had appeared so dramatically in the public domain, our interest was in the recollections and reflections of the key participants on the events surrounding its making, publication and reception. For example, in what ways had the Commission and Report been conceived, what were the processes through which the Report had been made, what was the news media and political strategy for its delivery as a public document, and what were the explanations and interpretations of what had happened to the Report upon publication and in the subsequent three years? The intention was to move beyond the commentary on the political and news media response to the *Parekh Report* (Richardson, 2000; Petley, 2000; Parekh, 2001; Pilkington, 2003; Fortier, 2005). Our broader concerns were examining the power of the news media to 'open up' and 'close down' policy interventions around race issues; and the

nature of intellectual labour on race issues in an extremely volatile public sphere (see McLaughlin and Neal, 2004, 2007; see also Olssen, 2004).

These were the questions which drove our desire to meet with the Commissioners and formed the basis of our conversations and interview schedule. Although these were all focused on the same discussion points, the conversations/interviews did vary in terms of where they took place, their emphasis and their duration. All the participants were overwhelmingly based in London and no one was interviewed outside of the South East of England. The interviews took place in a number of mainly metropolitan settings: hotel bars, the House of Lords, restaurants, Commissioners' own offices, private houses and once at the Open University. The variations in the emphasis of the interview conversations tended to reflect particular Commissioners' levels of involvement in and responsibility for the production of the Report. While this 'part-timeness' is only to be expected given the large number of people involved and the other commitments of some of the Commissioners, it did contribute to an unevenness in the deliberations and drafting activities of the Commission.

In a seeming reflection of this unevenness, there was notable diversity in the approach that particular Commissioners took to the interviews. Some interviews were lengthy - as long as three hours - while others were briefer, although even the shortest interview was still an hour long. The duration depended on the particular narrative of the participant and on the amount of supplementary material that many brought with them or made available to us from their own private archives. One of our participants presented us with a substantial collection of papers and private correspondence. That some Commissioners retained such archives seemed to bear a direct correlation to their role within the Commission and their sense of responsibility for the production and launch of the Report (see below).

What was also very apparent from the outset was the need for us, as researchers, to be sensitive to the extent to which the news media coverage of the Report - including the vilification of individual Commissioners - might have impacted on and shaped recollection of the Commission and the *Parekh Report*. Of similar concern to us were the ways in which, despite the anonymisation of interview data, it was clear that anonymity was not a sufficient enough tool to avoid particular voices (and perspectives) being recognised. This was especially so in a research setting in which all the respondents were known to each other through various professional and social networks and linked by their involvement in a specific event. For example, a very common fieldwork occurrence was for individual

respondents to ask us to whom else we had spoken and/or, somewhat unnervingly, knowing exactly to whom we had talked. Certain Commissioners also 'guided' us to other key participants and/or attempted to identify the individuals who had played a central role in the work of the Commission. We were also, on occasions, politely 'warned off' pursuing other key informants or sensitive questions. It was also common for our participants to express regret that, due to other commitments, they had not been able to be part of certain debates or decisions or been able to read and comment on key chapters. They felt that if this had not been the case then the outcome for the Report might have been different. While we return to spend more time with a number of the issues raised here, it is to the methodological commentaries on problem of power and elite interviews that we now turn.

### **Problematising researching policy elites**

Since Ann Oakley (1981) raised the problematic questions of women researching women, feminist perspectives have not only engaged with the ways in which the researcher-researched relation contains fraught and turbulent power dynamics, but have also sought to introduce and work with research principles of openness, reciprocity, mutuality, and exchange (see, for example, Stanley and Wise, 1983; Duelli Klein, 1983; Harding, 1987). These debates extended into a range of topics, such as standpoint epistemologies, acknowledgement of partiality and empathy, and the role and place of political and action research.

During the 1990s, these debates developed through critical engagement, some of which stressed the challenges of enacting such research principles in the field (see, for example, Troyna, 1993, on the difficulties of symmetrical researching and Rose, 1997, on the limits of transparent reflexivity). Forming part of this critical debate were voices which argued that principles such as reciprocity and mutuality did not easily transfer to settings where the subject of the research appeared to inhabit and or represent a professional or powerful place. For example, Smart, drawing on her experience of researching magistrates, argued that:

in both Oakley's discussion on doing feminist research and in Stanley and Wise's book on the problems of research for feminists there is an assumption that the power imbalance between people 'being researched' and 'the researcher' is basically in favour of the latter . . . but my experience of researching the 'locally powerful' does not fit with this model at all . . . I find

this assertion remarkable and only explicable if we ignore all social class divisions and the structures of dominance in society. (Smart, 1984: 157)

Similarly, in her doctoral research on equality policy-making in universities, Neal (1995) argued that in her interviews with higher education managers, academics and administrators, power very much seemed to reside with her research participants rather than herself and any attempt to create a 'flatter' research relationship was not only difficult but also not appropriate. Duke (2002) too, in her research on drug policy and penal welfare, has emphasised the marginal experiences of the researcher in interview settings which involve elite and 'in-demand' policy-makers. The distinction between researching powerful and non-powerful subjects and its impacts has been similarly commented on by Desmond who suggests that 'working in an elite field poses major difficulties which stem from the challenges of researching up, which are quite different to those encountered in studying down' (2004: 262, quoted in Smith, 2006: 643).

It is not our intention to minimise these experiences of power in the research encounter. What we would suggest is that this debate has reached something of a methodological impasse. In other words, reciprocal and mutual research approaches can be understood as appropriate in those research environments in which the researcher appeared more powerful, but offer limited insight and relevance in research environments in which the research participants could be identified as more powerful. This impasse is a reflection of a more linear orientated conception of power. Power is rather statically defined as residing in the explicit structural positions of either the researcher or the research participant rather than as an ambiguous, fluid, multi-directional dynamic, which can flow unevenly across and between different positions in the research relationship.

The need to apply a post-structuralist filter to the debates as to the issue of power in qualitative research, and particularly in the interview setting, is the central argument made by Smith (2006). Smith raises two important and interconnected issues. The first of these is how to apply a more 'mobile' interpretation of power to the research interview, and the second concerns the problematic question of how elites are defined and the extent to which elites hold 'transferable' power across a range of diverse social and political settings:

the idea that elites can be neatly defined and treated as consistently powerful is a view which relies on a rather simplistic idea that there is a dichotomy between powerful elites and

powerless others. . . such an outlook ignores the proposition that power exists in a variety of modalities . . . that these modalities of power can be negotiated and are neither not inscribed and consequently that elites may change over time (even during the course of one research project). (Smith, 2006: 645)

Smith is not the only commentator to be troubled as to how elites are defined within social research. For example, Cochrane's research on local politicians also emphasised the ways in which elites can change over time, and notes that overt indicators of power may well be misleading and obscure more hidden sites of power and influence (1998: 2127).

It is the theoretical, empirical and methodological unease with the meaning of 'elite', raised by commentators such as Smith and Cochrane, which directly resonates with the methodological experiences and research findings from our project. We cited above the Report's description of the Commissioners as 'distinguished individuals' and, certainly from the point of view of their professional status and public achievements, the Commissioners can be categorised as elites in terms of them occupying positions of influence within policy and political networks. However, the public and political reception of the *Parekh Report* illuminates not only the contested nature of elite status, but also the extent to which an elite individual can be personally destabilised when designated as 'unpatriotic'. For example, the hostility that characterised much of the response of the conservative news media to the Report extended to the Commissioners themselves. They were variously presented - or more specifically 'mediatised' (that is, publicly constructed within and through news media representation) - as 'intellectual godfathers' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 15 October, 2000); 'left wing cronies' (*Daily Telegraph*, 13 October, 2000); 'of foreign extraction' (*Times*, 12 October, 2000); 'learned and well-intentioned idiots' (*Times*, 12 October, 2000); 'fools', 'Britain bashers' and 'metropolitan, chattering class elites' (*Sun*, 11 October, 2000); 'out of touch governing classes' (*Sunday Times*, 15 October, 2000) 'race warriors' (*Daily Mail*, 13 October, 2000). The elite status of the Commissioners was clearly not sufficient to shield them from a highly personalised news media attack. In fact, the 'un-representativeness' of the Commissioners became integral to the negative mediatisation.

Similarly, the multi-ethnic composition of the Commission underpinned the hostile news media response, which presented the Report and its authors as 'anti-British' (for further discussion of this, see [McLaughlin and Neal](#), 2007). As Bhikhu Parekh, the Chair of the Commission, later noted:

In politics, 'who says' is just as important as 'what' he or she says . . . Although the majority of our commissioners were white and of impeccable liberal credentials, the fact that there were so many high-profile black and Asian intellectuals gave the impression that the Commission and its report had a distinctly minority orientation. This imposed tangible and subtle limits on what the Report should and should not say - limits which it could transgress, as indeed it did, only at its peril. (2001: 11)

It is the ways in which the instabilities and fragile 'legitimacies' of the elite position - intensified by the multicultural public face of the Commission - became manifested in the research encounter that we now examine.

### **Emotional policy-makers?**

When we interviewed the Commissioners, at least two years had elapsed since the publication of the Report. The news media interest had faded and in policy terms it had been overtaken by the race riots in Bradford, Burnley and other northern Pennine towns, and the emergence of the social cohesion agenda. The report's lack of any explicit presence in this agenda is in itself noteworthy.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the intensity of experiences surrounding the Report's publication and reception, unsurprisingly, still heavily inflected the research encounter and the interview conversations. While we as researchers had been cognisant of the need to be sensitive to the reflexive demands our project asked of participating Commissioners, we did not anticipate the depth of the emotional ties between some of the Commissioners and the Report. Nor were we equipped initially to deal with their remarkable openness in admitting the personal and emotional impact of the negative reception of the Report. What we discuss below are some of the configurations of this openness, the ways in which they impacted on the research relationship and the nature of the power dynamic within this.

### **Discourses of the personal: policy-making as a painful experience**

It demonstrates the extent to which the policy-making world appears disconnected from emotions so that we were repeatedly struck by the number of Commissioners who informed us that the Report's publication was a *painful* experience. This experience was usually directly articulated in response to our questions, as this example illustrates:

SN: What was the impact on the Commission of the news media coverage?

Commissioner: Well, painful of course. I didn't get as much personal abuse as some other Commissioners did but I did get some and I was stopped by people in the street saying what an appalling thing you've done, 'you've betrayed us'. And there was a sort of tension in quite a lot of personal contact [between Commissioners] for a while . . . I suppose I felt defensive for a while about any debate on the subject.

What is more of a challenge to convey, because it is not present in the extracts from the interview transcripts, was the extent to which the general sense of 'a painful experience' defined the broader 'mood' of the interviews. There were moments when research participants appeared to find it difficult to put into words what they felt about the Report, and the interview would have to stop until the individual felt able to continue. As interviewers we were unprepared for the intensity of this emotional recall and were uncertain as to how best, or if at all, to respond and offer any reassurance or words of comfort and empathy. This encounter was part of what Liz Bondi has described as the 'inherent uncertainty of fieldwork' in which researchers 'confront an array of questions and dilemmas . . . [including whether] we should seek to empathise with those we interview' (2003: 67). In returning to the interview we cited above, it is possible to see the way in which the painfulness of the experience of the Report's publication could dominate the interview conversation. This extract comes from a much later point in the interview when this Commissioner is asked about news media impact on the Report's future in relation to policy-making:

Commissioner: Yes, I mean there were later meetings and some Home Office discussions . . . but as an influential driver of policy it was completely lost.

EM: That must have been . . .

Commissioner: . . . it was quite painful, yes.

In other interviews with other Commissioners, the public response to the Report and its very personal impact was remembered and discussed in similar terms with us, as the following extract shows:

Commissioner: Oh it was very difficult, it's very difficult. It was horrendous because you know, well I was talking to a friend who was going through this process last week about *The Daily Mail* and he said I remember what happened when the Report was published. *The Daily*

*Mail* had put in all your mug shots and a list of the 'crimes' that you had committed. And, you know, most of us were academics or the kind of people who had not been through anything like this before. I mean some people had and were more used to it than most of the rest of us, but I think that sort of media attention . . . and the awful letters that were published in the papers and the even more awful letters that we all received via the Runnymede Trust and at home. It was a horrifying experience.

EM: You were present at the Report's launch?

Commissioner: Yes, yes.

EM: What was it like?

Commissioner: Horrible, it was really horrible. There were a lot of journalists there and then Straw made this speech.

EM: Were you aware before he made his speech - was there a sense of the media response?

Commissioner: I didn't know which line he was going to take, I really didn't know. I didn't expect him to be quite so . . . I think [some of the other Commissioners present] were more shocked than I was about Jack Straw's kind of extraordinary betrayal - that was how they saw it.

EM: And you weren't so shocked?

Commissioner: I wasn't because I know the power of the press.

We have cited the interview text at some length here as it not only provides some insight into the personal experience of being in the public domain, but it also introduces a delineation between those more experienced elite figures who are used to the news media spotlight and others who are not. Certainly, some of the Commissioners who were more overt public figures spoke of the political naivety of imagining a document such as the *Parekh Report* would receive anything other than a hostile response, especially from the conservative news media. Commissioners making this argument also stressed that the news media attention guaranteed a much higher public profile for the Report. This view is expressed, albeit ambivalently, in this interview extract:

Commissioners did try to put the other side and I think over time that started to come through and I know . . . I mean think one of the things, if you're talking about the positives, I mean I did think selling more books was positive. It may have been at a price, but it's difficult to know quite at what price.

Extending this position, other Commissioners argued that the news media response, while negative, also provided opportunities for high-profile debates about national identity:

There was a view [shared by some but by no means all Commissioners] that the right, the nationalist right, understood at some kind of visceral, intuitive level, that we were challenging everything that they stood for and then they responded . . . irrationally, hysterically and obviously with a certain amount of character assassination and so on. As I understand it, the view is that we had to go through that kind of conflict to get to the other side. To get to the kind of inclusive, plural Britain that we wanted, we had to have a kind of emotional struggle like that.

What is common to these readings of the publication of the *Parekh Report* is a consensus that it had been irreparably damaged or harmed at the moment of its emergence into the public arena and, certainly for some of those involved, that harm was felt at a personal level. This is summed up in the following comments:

It's as if, I'll tell you what the press response was like, it was as if we'd been in a submarine for two years - we all understand each other's view. We came to understand each other very well, we knew where we disagreed. We had this elaborate sort of discourse set up and then we just surfaced into another world, opened the hatch and - do you understand what I mean? It was as if a private discussion had suddenly been publicly aired: 'We've been recording you for Radio 4!' So I think the Commission was shell-shocked by that.

Our key point here is not simply to show that in our interviews with Commissioners there were very personal revelations of feelings of shock, embarrassment, disappointment and frustration, although the participants' repeated use of adjectives such as 'painful', 'horrendous', 'horrible', 'difficult', 'shell-shocked' is particularly striking. Rather, what we want to emphasise is that these intimate articulations created a research encounter in which participants, despite their professional status, authority and/or public standing, were in effect made vulnerable *again* through their emotional recall and retelling of their memories and

experience of the public reception of their work. Our interview schedule was inviting them to reflect on and share with us - two strangers - their experiences of a policy project that very publicly had, at the very least, not worked out as intended and which had involved varying levels of public abuse and ridicule (McLaughlin and Neal, 2004). Again, exactly where power is in this research relation is difficult to locate. It cannot be easily identified as fixed and flowing from our elite research participants: there was not a straightforward transfer of professional or structural power into our interview settings. As it became entangled with emotionally difficult reflexive processes, power ran through our research relation in a much looser, messier and multidirectional way and more than anything was 'unpredictable and variable' (Smith, 2006: 651).

This is not to say that we did not experience a sense of our non-elite status and powerlessness. In one of those rather comical moments that fieldwork can throw up, we always recall one of our interviews which had been arranged at the private residence of a Commissioner. After getting completely lost in heavy rain, we arrived late, extremely wet and generally looking, we are convinced, very far from professional and confidence-inducing. Proceeding with the interview, sitting in our damp clothes on an expensive sofa in a large Georgian living room, with an immaculately dressed participant, was a moment in which the sense of who was in control of or managing the research encounter was very unclear.

However, as Gillian Rose (1997: 307) reminds us, researchers always inhabit a place of considerable power and authority given that they design and 'direct' the project, they hold the interpretative power over the data collected and they make decisions as to what then happens to it. Power in this sense - premised on a research agenda and representational/knowledge production and dissemination - has of course been the basis of much of the concern of feminist and other critical methodology in research settings with non-elite participants (for example, see Bourne and Sivanandan, 1982; McDowell, 1992). But power is of course differently present in research settings which involve professional and/or elite participants. In a number of ways, the power relations of our research interviews were then profoundly uncertain. On the one hand, our research gaze *was* upwards. On the other hand, the Commissioners were responding to our research agenda and the specifics of our project and were making disclosures to us about particular memories of the production and publication of the Report. This and their willingness to share these with us were all factors which meant that control and authority in the research relationship did not simply or straightforwardly reside

with the research participants. Accompanying the recollection of the publication of the Report as a painful experience, our participants' reflexivity was also characterised by another strong emotion, and it is this which we now consider.

### **Discourses of the personal: the sense of responsibility**

The second key emotionally framed theme that emerged in the interviews was the responsibility that many Commissioners felt for the Report and what had happened to it. This sense of responsibility was often tightly entangled with accounts of the negative experience of the public reception of the Report which we explored above. These various expressions of responsibility are significant for two reasons. First, they again shed light on the complexity of power within social research relations; and, second, they shed light on an under-researched aspect of policy-making worlds: that is, the relation of policy-makers and elites to the policy documents that they author and influence. While a focus on the richness of multi-scalar policy worlds advocated by argumentation theory (Rein and Schon, 1993; Fischer and Forester, 1993) has been influential in the shift away from technicist approaches to the analysis of policy generation, formation and outcomes (Neal, 1998; Duke, 2003; Bochel and Bochel, 2004), there is still little empirical commentary on the nature and character of the emotional bonds between policy-makers and the policy deliberations and documents in which they have been involved. This relative absence is perhaps even more surprising given the increasing interest in emotions in sociological and cultural studies debates (see Jackson, 1993; Craib, 1997; Ahmed, 2004; Clarke, 2006; Probyn, 2005, for example) and given that 'without emotions, social life, including our decision making capacities and our ability to make informed choices amongst a plurality of options, would be impossible' (Williams, 1998: 761, cited in Clarke, 2006: 1158).

However, we do want to sound a small note of caution here as we want to be careful not to overstate our argument. Clearly, not all the actors involved in policy-making processes will be emotionally bonded to the policy processes and deliberations that they are part of. Professional policy-makers may be simultaneously involved in a number of policy domains or may move relatively swiftly from one policy domain to another and so do not have the time or opportunity for the development of attachments or emotionally 'thick' investment in the documents they author. We have argued that the nature of policy-making communities and networks means that different actors can be involved in very different stages of policy generation, and again this is likely to impact on any emotional connection and commitment

that those involved in the policy-making process may feel. The very specific conditions under which the Commission was formed and operated were likely to have enhanced the Commissioners' sense of responsibility and emotional connection to the Report. For example, the longevity of the Commission's life, its mandate and political ambitions, the stability of its core membership and, related to this, its internal convivial social dynamics are factors which are likely to have impacted on Commissioners' specific ties to the final document they produced (McLaughlin and Neal, 2007).

Commissioners' discourses of responsibility were multi-layered and diversely articulated. For some, there was a generic sense of responsibility towards other Commissioners - who were also friends and long-term colleagues - that this, a 'once-in-a-political generation' opportunity, had not managed to be more successful. In a number of our interviews with Commissioners they voiced the level of personal investment that they and others had made and the 'high hopes' that the *Parekh Report* would become a memorable 'public document' (such as the *Scarman Report* and the *Macpherson Report*), and that a permanent Commission would be established to monitor the implementation of its recommendations. It was not uncommon for Commissioners to tell us of regret that they had not done more to 'fireproof' the document against the conservative newspapers, or to tone down the natural temptation to provoke the conservative newspapers for the sake of front-page headlines and editorials. There was a perceptible sense of guilt for allowing the Report to become, as one Commissioner described it, a 'political orphan' (McLaughlin and Neal, 2004). There was also widespread recognition that Bhikhu Parekh, as Chair of the Commission and the named author - in the tradition of race-centred policy documents (see above) - of the Report, had been placed in an unenviable situation as a result of the fall-out from the news media attacks.

There was an emotionality to some parts of these conversations, which is difficult to effectively capture in the context of a journal article. This emotional content is part of the general 'feel' and/or experience of the immediate research encounter rather than a quantifiable presence. It is nevertheless important to at least note interview moods as they are reflective of research participants' perspectives and accounts. In our project these accounts were personal expressions of responsibility for the way in which the Report had been written, but this responsibility had also been publicly commented on by the Chair of the Commission:

We must ourselves accept part of the blame for not expressing ourselves more clearly. None of us, including three of our distinguished journalist commissioners, expected the relevant

paragraphs to arouse so much interest and concern and naturally took no precautions against it . . . Words such as post-nation state and racial coding . . . are fine in academic discourse but can become sources of confusion and fear in political life. (Parekh, 2001: 7-9)

This acknowledgement would also emerge in our interview conversations. Some Commissioners described in very similar terms what they retrospectively saw as mistakes in how aspects of the Report had been written, as this example evidences:

The view I share with some other Commissioners was that the media battle was extremely damaging to us, certainly in the short run and possibly in the medium and long term as well, and that it was based on a misunderstanding, because I think we created the mess in our drafting, in our texts. I don't think people completely made it up; when I say people, I mean the *Telegraph*, the *Sun*, and the *Daily Mail* and to some extent even the *Guardian* really. I think that if you look at in particular pages 37 to 39 of our report, there is a genuine ambiguity, and perhaps even an incoherence, about what we're saying . . . The whole media frenzy of that week or fortnight or however long it lasted all hung on one or two or three phrases and . . . one of them was about the post-national. Another one was about whether Britishness meant coded racism and the third one was about whether the country should be called a community of communities . . . They were phrases just snatched up but nevertheless they were what the media debate was all about, so my view on that is that we must take some of the blame for the mixed messages and [recognise] that it was genuinely damaging to us.

We have quoted extensively from the text of this interview because it is remarkable for its frankness in identifying authors' responsibility for the textual weaknesses in the Report and the hostile news media readings that this facilitated. But this frankness is methodologically important as well. Again, it is the *willingness* of our participants to share a policy-making narrative that is about difficulties ('we created the mess') and an associated set of traumatic experiences ('the media battle was extremely damaging to us') that does not sit easily or coherently with traditional notions of powerful elites. It is a narrative that works in two key ways: first, it acknowledges political (and personal) vulnerability which makes a 'bigger' comment as to the potential instabilities of the public sphere inhabited by elite figures and, second, in its revelations, it is a narrative which again stresses the unsettled nature of the power dynamic in the 'upwards' research encounter.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have scrutinised the unsettled nature of power dynamics in research encounters which involve elite participants. Our fieldwork experiences confirm that of other researchers who have emphasised the need to unpack the notion that elites hold power and are able to deploy and reproduce this power in fixed and similar ways across a range of social and political settings (Cochrane, 1998; Shurmer-Smith, 1998; Smith, 2006). Drawing on our empirical data, we have suggested how authority and dominance did not straightforwardly flow, 'top-down', from our elite participants, despite their recognised status in public life and their spheres of work. Nor did authority and dominance straightforwardly flow, 'top-down', from us as researchers, as some methodological commentaries have suggested is core to the research-researched relation. What we have provided is a glimpse of untidy and emotional research encounters in which power moved in mobile ways across interview landscapes.

Our description of the Future of Multi Ethnic Britain Commissioners as elites is accurate in that there were aspects of their public profiles, their social (and media) capital, their belonging to and influence within professional, political and/or policy networks, their ability to 'agenda set', their political experience, their expertise and so forth that conform to conventional definitions of the category (Bochel and Bochel, 2004: 67). However, following others (Shurmer-Smith, 1998; Cochrane, 1998; Smith, 2006), we have argued that the definition of category elite can be problematic, and membership of it can be highly context-specific and unstable, especially when it intersects with notions of race, ethnicity and nation. The instability of the elite status of our research participants was constructed through the bruising experience of a high-profile, predominantly hostile news media response to their policy document. The lacuna between the *Parekh Report's* description of the Commissioners as 'distinguished individuals' and the *Times* and *Daily Telegraph's* mediatisation of the Commissioners as 'well-intentioned idiots' and 'out of touch governing classes' is an obvious example of the relative fragility of an elite status, particularly in a volatile public sphere. It also reflects Cochrane's argument that there is a need to recognise the 'extent to which elites - or those groups which appear to have power - may themselves be transitory' (1998: 2130).

Smith (2006: 651) makes a brief suggestion that 'we need to make room to consider the possibility of "vulnerable elites" and in many ways our paper is response to and development of this notion. In their discussions with us about the public moment of the Commission's report, our elite participants articulated a *multi-layered* vulnerability: in their accounts of the negative public reception of the Report, in their accounts of the personal experience of this

reception, in their depiction of the impact of this hostile reception on the policy and political credibility of report and, importantly, in their willingness to share and articulate these accounts with us. For us, as researchers, hearing these experiential accounts of course involved us being, as Bondi has described, 'emotionally present' (2003: 71). As researchers, we empathised with our participants' narratives and experiences. Indeed, we had utmost respect for what they tried to realise through their Commission. However, at the same time we recognised that it is vital that the interviewer retains the autonomy to think critically about these responses and experiences and not be 'incapacitated by them' (ibid.). It is within such a messy emotional research environment that structuralist notions of power relations struggle to explain and identify where power lies exactly between an elite research participant and a researcher.

What were simultaneously revealed within these narratives were the degrees of emotional connection that some Commissioners had to the Report they produced. We have argued that the idea of an emotional relationship between policy-makers and the policy documents they shape and/or author is still one of which we know remarkably little, and this is particularly so in relation to those policy-makers who are politically independent of governments or formal political parties. As we have argued previously (Neal, 2003; McLaughlin and Neal, 2004, 2007), reports from deliberative Commissions and 'crisis event' public inquiries tend to have a particularly high profile as they enter and are critically scrutinised in the 24/7 mediatised public sphere. What our fieldwork narrative yields are glimpses into the political difficulties and potentially traumatic personal costs of being in this public sphere (see McLaughlin and Neal, 2007, for a detailed examination of this) as well as glimpses of the connections and attachments between policy-makers, policy communities and policy documents. What we have also demonstrated in our dual-strand, context-specific story, is the need for more research on the complexities and uncertainties of an upwards research gaze, the concept of 'vulnerable elites' and the emotions of policy-makers who can be complexly tied to, and have senses of responsibility for, the documents they generate and 'own'.

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## Notes

1. The project was funded by the Faculty of Social Sciences, Open University between 2002 and 2004.
2. The Runnymede Trust has continued to develop policy work using certain parts of the Report and its recommendations. The Trust published an update on the Report in 2004, for example.

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