

## **Chapter One – Constructing the Race-Crime Problem (Introduction)**

### **Chapter summary**

This chapter maps the historical development of racist ideas about black and minority ethnic crime and deviancy, and its reworked forms in contemporary society. It raises our attention to how there is a need to consider the ways in which problematic construction of crimes as scientifically racialised continue to exist in post-Macpherson UK. This chapter covers:

- Race science and enlightenment proposed hierarchical ideas about race where blackness is seen as undesirable, deviant and problematic.
- How sociology examines the social construction of race within a power relationship, and contested race science arguments.
- How older notions of ‘black criminality’ are being reworked, supported by references to notions of ‘white victimhood’.
- The ways in which racialised criminalisation and the consequential panics are used to justify the surveillance and control of people of black and minority ethnic backgrounds.
- The role of media in the construction of ‘black criminality’ and ‘white victimhood’.
- Racial profiling in contemporary society, and how the war on terror panics are also about wider power relations between black and minority ethnic people and the state, and is a form of racialised governance.

## Links to SAGE articles

Fekete, Liz (2004) 'Anti-Muslim racism and the European security state', *Race and Class*, 46(1): 3-29.

<http://rac.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/46/1/3?ijkey=r4vhc5ItD3VuA&keytype=ref&siteid=sprac>

Gabbidon, Shaun L.; Penn, Everett B.; Jordan, Kareem L.; and, Higgins, George E. (2009) 'The influence of race/ethnicity on the perceived prevalence and support for racial profiling at airports', *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 20(3): 344-358.

<http://cjp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/0887403408327384?ijkey=VAdr7gOGJkMgk&keytype=ref&siteid=spcjp>

Khiabany, Gohlam and Williamson, Milly (2008) 'Veiled bodies, naked racism: Culture, politics and race in the Sun', *Race and Class*, 50(2): 69-88.

<http://rac.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/50/2/69?ijkey=qBDCEZQ19gPPs&keytype=ref&siteid=sprac>

Sivanandan, Ambalavaner (2006) 'Race, terror and civil society', *Race and Class*, 47(1): 1-8.

<http://rac.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/47/3/1?ijkey=0eoxAqBohe1js&keytype=ref&siteid=sprac>

Stokoe, Elizabeth and Edwards, Derek (2007) 'Black this, black that': Racial insults and reported speech in neighbour complaints and police interrogations', *Discourse*

*and Society*, 18(3): 337-372.

<http://das.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/18/3/337?ijkey=KBILZ9zuKeoOA&keytype=ref&siteid=spdas>

Worley, Claire (2005) “‘It's not about race, it's about the community': New Labour and community cohesion”, *Critical Social Policy*, 25(4): 483-496.

<http://csp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/25/4/483?ijkey=Pq3wu6gqm.Qdc&keytype=ref&siteid=spcsp>

### **Case study: Race talk in Hurricane Katrina**

The use of raced language and images in media reporting of news also has the ability to fuel hostility about black and minority ethnic groups. It does this by constructing them as dangerous ‘others’, who are a problem group for the law and order of the society in which they are found. Unbalanced and inaccurate images of a black criminal threat (Connolly, 2002; Fawcett, 1998) are presented through the use of emotive language, making them more readily palatable by audiences, despite any factual flaws. The power of media racial bias and the readiness of which the audience passively accept it as accurate was recently illustrated with the ways in which media outlets reported on human behaviour in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which hit the United States Gulf Coast in 2005:

*The deadliest hurricane in the United States since 1928 pounded across the Gulf Coast at the end of August, killing more than 1300 people in five states...Most of the deaths from Hurricane Katrina occurred in New Orleans, which was flooded when*

*levees protecting the below-sea-level city were breached, making it almost impossible for people still in the city to leave or for rescue workers to get in. Perhaps as many as 50 000 New Orleanians, most of them poor and black, jammed into the Superdome and the city's convention centre; there they awaited evacuation for several days with little fresh water, food, sanitation facilities or medical care...Dead bodies were left floating in the floodwaters.* (National Weather Service, 2005, cited in Vorhees et al., 2007: 415-416).

In its aftermath, images were re-laid to the world which showed the survivors stranded on house-flooded rooftops, or stranded at the city's Superdome arena and Convention Center. What was most striking about these images was that the overwhelming majority of survivors were of black African American background. This in itself is interesting as it revealed the racialised divisions and disadvantage in terms of which groups had access to means of escaping the flood. In media presentations, this group were subjected to a series of false reports about their supposed volumous criminal behaviour, such as looting, rape and violent attacks (Sommers et al., 2006).

This demonization of the black African American survivors was so easily accepted, because their 'other' status had been presented to the outside world from the outset when they had been initially referred to as 'refugees' (Sommers et al., 2006). This is a problem not least because the term 'refugee' is racially biased in countries such as America, but also because it is an inaccurate term to use to describe American citizens still legitimately within USA borders (Sommers et al., 2006). Clearly, in the eyes of mainstream white America, though the survivors were geographically within the USA

border, in terms of race and supposed true notions of what it is to be an American, they were considered outside its borders. This made their general presentation as being dangerous, violent, immoral criminals even more believable. Here for example, reports described sniper fire being aimed at rescuers, homicide, and gangs committing rapes against teenage victims and even babies. There were even allegations made by CNN, one of the main media outlets, that gunfire was being directed at helicopters on an aid and rescue mission – a story which of course was later revealed as untrue (Piere and Gerhart, 2005, cited in Sommers et al., 2006: 6).

Such images and stories, the majority of which are inaccurate or complete fiction, generate fear and panic amongst the white population, as well as promoting a discourse of ‘racist commonsense’. Consider for instance the ‘finding’ and ‘looting’ images that were re-laid to the world. Here, two photos and their accompanying captions reporting on similar events (the search for food), saw a black African American youth being described as ‘A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store’, and a white couple being described as ‘Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store’. In just a few sentences, we are presented with powerful and covert messages about American citizenship (‘a young man’ Vs ‘residents’); criminal status (‘looting’ Vs ‘finding’); and, heroism through adversity (‘walks through’ Vs ‘wade through’).

The ability to capitalise on Katrina for one’s own racially based political motivations (whether this be individually or on a group basis) was also used by web based outlets, whose rumour spreading and myth-making was in abundance in the months following

Katrina. Here a number of emails were written and forwarded, and blogs written on the supposed non-human and criminal behaviour of Katrina's black African American survivors. For example, the following extract was found on the web, and claimed to be a first-hand experience of an encounter with survivors who had taken a comfort break at a Texas rest area:

*Last Friday, my dad, who works for TxDOT [Texas Department of Transportation], answered a call for TxDOT employees to go help with the refugees at this rest stop. These buses from New Orleans start pulling in...As they get off the bus, they are greeted and shown to the restrooms—where they pee all over the walls, floors, mirrors, etc. They did not even flush the toilets. Left the restrooms in a HORRIBLE mess...He and my mom said the people were HORRIBLE. Nasty, filthy mouthed, ungrateful...Why the hell can't they line up themselves and help unload all these trucks and cars full of FREE stuff? Okay, let them have a day or two of rest but then put those folks to work taking care of themselves. Why the hell should any of them want to get a job when they can lay around all day in free air conditioned stadiums where they don't have to spend a dime and they have TV, entertainment and education and great food? ('Rest stop', 2005, cited in Sommers et al., 2006: 10).*

This post does more than comment on the supposed poor behaviour of the survivors – allegations which the rest stop supervisor refuted, but goes further by discussing them in de-humanised ways ('pee all over the walls...' and 'nasty, filthy mouthed, ungrateful'), and as not being deserving of the nation's hospitality ('they are greeted' and 'lazy'), which again reinforces their 'refugee', outsider and 'other' status (Sommers et al., 2006).

## References

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Fawcett, Liz (1998) 'Fitting In: Ethnic Minorities and the News Media', in P.Hainsworth (ed.), *Divided Society: Ethnic Minorities and Racism in Northern Ireland*. London: Pluto Press. pp.104-126.

Sommers, Samuel R.; Apfelbaum, Evan P.; Dukes, Kristin N.; Toosi, Negin; and, Wang, Elsie J. (2006) 'Race and Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina: Analysis, Implications, and Future Research Questions', *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 6(1): 1-17.

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