

# Anti-Oppressive Social Work

A guide for developing cultural competence

Siobhan E. Laird





# Anti-Oppressive Social Work



# Anti-Oppressive Social Work

A guide for developing cultural competence

Siobhan E. Laird

© Siobhan Laird 2008

First published 2008

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.



SAGE Publications Ltd  
1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd  
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
Mathura Road  
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd  
33 Pekin Street #02-01  
Far East Square  
Singapore 048763

**Library of Congress Control Number: 2007932194**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the  
British Library

ISBN 978-1-4129-1235-8  
ISBN 978-1-4129-1236-5 (pbk)

Typeset by C&M Digital (P) Ltd., Chennai, India  
Printed in India at Replika Press Pvt. Ltd  
Printed on paper from sustainable resources

---

# Contents

---

Acknowledgements	vi
Preface	vii
1 Racism and Ethnic Minorities	1
2 Anti-Racist and Anti-Oppressive Practice	20
3 Cultural Competence in Social Work	35
4 Communities with Roots in India	51
5 Communities with Roots in Pakistan and Bangladesh	73
6 Communities with Roots in the Caribbean	97
7 Communities with Roots in China	116
8 Economic Migrants and Refugees	137
Conclusion: Developing Cultural Awareness	155
Bibliography	160
Index	178

---

# Acknowledgements

---

I would like to thank my editors, Zoe Elliot-Fawcett and Anna Luker, for their total commitment to this project and their encouragement throughout its stages of working and reworking. I am also deeply grateful to the many practitioners in Sheffield who have willingly shared their experiences of working with people from ethnic minorities. Their discussions have helped to shape this book. Finally, I am entirely in the debt of Dorcas Boreland, my mother, who has given invaluable advice and support from the inception of this book.

---

# Preface

---

## About this Book

There are two experiences which have led me to write this book. The first was growing up in Northern Ireland, particularly during the 1970s. The conflict in that part of the United Kingdom cost the lives of over 3,500 people and injured around 45,000. Discrimination, predominantly against Catholics in the public and private sectors, was widespread. The sectarian divide was also articulated through separate provision for Protestant and Catholic children, most of whom attended different schools and, if brought into care, were looked after in different residential homes. It was in my native Northern Ireland that I qualified as a social worker and subsequently worked as a practitioner in Belfast.

The second experience was my move in 1997 to West Africa where I was appointed Co-ordinator of Social Work at the University of Ghana. During my years in Ghana I became aware of the tensions between different ethnic communities. Some tribal groupings wielded more economic and political power than others. Occasionally, frictions flared into violent confrontation resulting in fatalities, the destruction of property, and families made destitute as they fled their villages to escape danger.

These diverse experiences of violence and inequality have made me reflect on my own social-work training and the extent to which it prepared me to meet these challenges. I have found it woefully lacking. Since the 1980s there has been a strong emphasis within social-work training on anti-racist practice. That focus has been exclusively defined by discrimination against *black* service-users by *white* social workers. This concept of racism has failed to embrace the complexities of ethnicity and the cultural differences between people, which lie behind these catch-all terms of *black* and *white*.

My own experiences convince me that to combat racism requires a more comprehensive understanding of discrimination than an exclusive focus on the *black/white* dichotomy. This book forms part of a small, though growing, number of texts which endeavour to improve anti-racist practice by introducing students and practitioners to the cultural backgrounds of ethnic communities living in the United Kingdom. I believe that cultural competence is a necessary and indispensable component of anti-racist practice.



## Structure of the Book

Chapter One explores the nature of discrimination against people from ethnic minorities. Chapter Two explores the concepts of anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice and critically examines the meaning of 'race' and 'ethnicity'. Chapter Three examines the concept of cultural competence and proposes a new framework for social-work practice with people from ethnic minorities. Chapters Four to Seven detail research conducted with the main minority groups in Britain, while Chapter Eight explores the cultural backgrounds of economic migrants and refugees living in the United Kingdom. The cultural values and lifestyles of each ethnic community are explored and consideration is given to how these differ from family to family, change over time and are often modified through contact with other communities in the United Kingdom.

At the end of Chapters Four to Eight there is a worked scenario, which explores how a culturally competent practitioner might intervene with service-users and carers from minority communities. They examine how cultural knowledge deployed through an open-minded engagement with service-users and carers can achieve culturally appropriate services. These scenarios are also designed to demonstrate the interconnections between cultural competence and anti-oppressive practice. Each chapter concludes with a short list of further reading to broaden cultural knowledge and deepen critical thinking.

The Conclusion sets out to reconcile cultural knowledge with the practitioner's own heritage and offers guidance on how to improve awareness of one's own cultural influences. This final section also details the major pitfalls practitioners need to avoid when addressing culture in social-work practice.

## The Use of the Terms Black and White

It is my contention in this book that the use of *black* and *white* as all-inclusive terms for people disguises important aspects of ethnicity and cultural heritage. However, the first two chapters of this book do employ these catch-all terms. This is because a number of the research studies cited in Chapter One make distinctions between *black* and *white* groupings. I have also used the terms *black* and *white* in Chapter Two as I am critiquing their use in anti-racist theory. For the rest of the book these terms are not used and are replaced by references to people from different ethnic minorities.

## The Choice of Ethnic Minorities for this Book

Much controversy has surrounded the categorisation of ethnicities. Different ways of conceptualising ethnic minorities produce different versions of their experiences.

Up until the 1980s national statistics identified ethnic minorities using very broad catch-all terms, typically dividing them into 'Asians' and 'West Indians'. Within these groupings there was no differentiation between those who immigrated to the United Kingdom and those born in the country. Nor were such statistics disaggregated for age or gender. Modood (1992) criticises this method of data collection and analysis because it creates a crude dichotomy between the circumstances of black and white citizens. This in turn disguises the divergent experiences of ethnic minority groups, which can be further subdivided on the basis of age, gender, language, religion, mixed parentage and ethnic self-identification.

Surveys such as the landmark *Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities* in 1997, based around family origin, and the 2001 Census, based on self-identified ethnicity, chosen from a pre-specified list, have endeavoured to refine the process of categorisation. The methods used in these two instances are not above reproach. Recognising the unavoidable imperfections of classifying ethnic groups, this text devotes a chapter to each of the main ethnic communities appearing in the 2001 Census. It endeavours to counteract the homogenising tendency of categorisation in the 2001 Census by highlighting the cultural and religious diversity within each ethnic group. Attention is also given to the differing experiences of ethnicity and racism due to age, gender and disability. In addition, Chapter Eight focuses on white minorities from Eastern Europe and countries of the former Soviet Union alongside black minorities from the African continent.

There is a fine line between drawing on background knowledge of a particular ethnic community to inform practice and making perfunctory stereotypical assumptions about the values of individual families and service-users. Chapters Four to Eight are organised around the main ethnic minorities in the United Kingdom. They are not definitive accounts of different minority groups and only provide information about *some* of the cultural influences which *may* have a bearing on the perspectives and needs of *some* service-users and carers. Taken altogether the chapters are designed to alert practitioners to the range of issues which can bear on the needs of service-users and carers from minority communities.





---

# Racism and Ethnic Minorities

---

## A Brief History of Ethnic Minorities in the United Kingdom

Ethnic minorities have formed part of British society since the sixteenth century. In the wake of the slave trade, and later employment as seamen, those of African descent established small but notable communities in the port cities of Bristol, Liverpool, Cardiff and London. Not until the years immediately after the Second World War and the critical need for labour did the United Kingdom witness large-scale immigration from New Commonwealth countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent. The labour shortage was acute in unskilled manual employment and low-paid service-sector jobs. Then, as now, these were taken up by recently arrived immigrants while members of the majority white population moved to better paid employment and working conditions. Initially, government policy facilitated the wave of post-war migration under the British Nationality Act 1948, which granted citizens of Commonwealth countries the unfettered right to enter, work and settle with their families in the United Kingdom. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s migrants continued to arrive and establish themselves mainly in Greater London and the principal manufacturing cities of England.

The introduction of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, changed government policy and sought to limit the numbers of Commonwealth immigrants by establishing stricter controls on who could enter the United Kingdom to work or reside. Immigration legislation enacted during the 1960s and 1970s was chiefly aimed at reducing the numbers from visible ethnic-minority groups entering Britain as opposed to white migrants from Australia, Canada and South Africa (Mason, 2000: 27; Clayton, 2004: 6–7). By the 1960s immigration for visible minorities was largely confined to dependants joining a male family member already settled in the United Kingdom. These ever more restrictive immigration controls were driven by concerns over race relations.

As early as 1958 tensions between white working-class communities and first-generation immigrants in London resulted in the Notting Hill riots. Conservative members of parliament, most prominently Enoch Powell, began to make populist pronouncements on the dangers of permitting entry into the United Kingdom of large numbers of Black and Asian immigrants. It was alleged that they would take the jobs of the indigenous white population and obtain entitlement to public-sector housing and welfare benefits without contributing to the economy (Schoen, 1977). The Government White Paper *Immigration from the Commonwealth* (Home Office, 1965) gave expression to this concern. It declared that the presence in Britain 'of nearly one million immigrants from the Commonwealth with different social and cultural backgrounds raises a number of problems and creates various social tensions in those areas where they are concentrated'. Implicit in this assertion was the anxiety that large ethnic minority populations would retain their own identities, hindering their assimilation into mainstream British society. Control of immigration therefore became closely linked to good race relations.

These assumptions, widely held by both politicians and the general public, resulted in viewing immigration as a problem rather than as a contribution to the economy or cultural diversity. In response to this climate of opinion, legislation enacted during the 1970s and 1980s progressively limited migration from the New Commonwealth, including family reunion. By the 1990s concern over the growing ethnic-minority population in Britain emerged anew as anxiety over the large numbers seeking asylum. In fact, applications for asylum (excluding dependants) rose from around 33,000 per year in 1994 to 84,000 by 2002 (Home Office, 2004: 1). To put this into perspective, even the figures of 2002 represent less than one asylum seeker per 1,000 people who visit the United Kingdom each year, either on business, vacation or to work (CIH, 2003: 4).

### **The Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951**

This international accord is commonly known as the Refugee Convention and was originally drawn up after the Second World War to safeguard displaced peoples across Europe. It continues to provide the primary source of law worldwide for the protection of refugees. Article 33 places a legal duty on each signatory to the Convention to provide a safe haven for those forced to leave their own countries under the following circumstances.

No Contracting State shall expel or return a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. (Art. 33(1))

Nations, such as the United Kingdom, which have signed up to the Refugee Convention are obliged to grant asylum to refugees fleeing persecution in their own

countries. Recent legislation has made the settlement of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom more difficult than previously. The Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 and the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 limit asylum seekers' right of appeal against refusal of their application and reduce access to welfare benefits. They also increase the power of the Home Office to deport 'failed' applicants from the country. These statutes were the product of a public perception that the United Kingdom was being swamped by asylum seekers who were invariably making bogus applications, claiming welfare benefits and absconding before they could be removed from Britain (Clayton, 2004: 10–11). Since the attack on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001, according to Clayton (2004: 16), the prevention of terrorism has become a covert objective of legislation relating to refugees. This is achieved through the ever greater statutory powers of the state to control, detain and remove asylum seekers.

While the term 'ethnic minorities' has become synonymous with black and Asian minorities it must not be forgotten that there are numerous people from white minority groups living in the United Kingdom. Some of these are long established, for example people from Ireland have been migrating to Britain for many centuries. Others, such as Jews and gypsies fleeing persecution, came to settle in England during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More recently, refugees from the Balkan wars of the 1990s and economic migrants from former Eastern Bloc countries, which are now members of the European Union, have increased the size of white ethnic communities in the United Kingdom. There is also increasing movement of people from countries of the former Soviet Union to member states of the European Union. Such individuals are not automatically protected from inequality by virtue of their colour. Many are confronted by the same prejudices, discrimination and immigration controls as are visible minorities.

### The 2001 Census

The 2001 Census surveyed the whole of the United Kingdom population and obtained information on people's ethnic background. It established that out of a total population of approximately 59 million 7.9% were from ethnic minorities. Of those describing themselves as from an ethnic minority:

- 50% identified as Asian
- 25% identified as Black
- 15% identified as mixed (dual heritage)
- 5% identified as Chinese

Almost half of those belonging to ethnic minorities live in London while the rest are concentrated in the major cities of the Midlands and the north of England, reflecting historical patterns of settlement. But this disguises the fact that 78% of 'Black Africans' and 61% of 'Black Caribbeans' live in the capital. By contrast, only 19% of Pakistanis reside in London with 21% settled in the West Midlands and a further 20% in



Yorkshire and the Humber. Different minorities have contrasting settlement patterns which have been strongly influenced by the location of first-generation migrants. The distribution of ethnic-minority populations in the United Kingdom is not only a result of original migration and settlement patterns. The dispersal policy introduced under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 relocates asylum seekers from Greater London and the south east to the regions. The National Asylum Support Service arranges for refugees to be accommodated by private- and public-sector landlords in 'cluster areas' within each region on a 'no choice' basis. This has increased the presence of ethnic minorities in towns located away from their established communities and thus in areas which can leave them relatively isolated.

## Race and Discrimination

The modern concept of race came to prominence during the nineteenth century. It was based on scientific claims that biological differences explained the diversity of peoples. Such ideas underpinned Social Darwinism which, based loosely on Darwin's theory of evolution, asserted that 'survival of the fittest' justified the dominance of some races over others. Conquest and domination was also rationalised through the belief that European peoples were mentally and physically superior to those of Africa and Asia. This same ideology was used to lend credence to the colonial exploits of European nations and the subjugation of peoples across the world (Miles & Brown, 2004: 37). Social Darwinism was again invoked by the Nazi regime during the twentieth century to legitimise the extermination of Jews in Europe. Public disquiet over colonialism and revulsion at the Holocaust discredited the biological concept of race (Miles & Brown, 2004: 59–60).

Social scientists and policy-makers have shifted attention away from *race* to the notion of *ethnicity*. In a frequently quoted definition, Smith (1986: 192) describes an ethnic group as 'a population whose members believe that in some sense they share common descent and a common cultural heritage or traditions, and who are so regarded by others'.

### The Parekh Report

This was the report of a Commission consisting of 23 distinguished persons from different community backgrounds created in 1998 by the Runnymede Trust, an independent think-tank dedicated to advancing racial justice in Britain. The Commission was required to 'analyse the current state of multi-ethnic Britain and to propose ways of countering racial discrimination and disadvantage' (Parekh, 2000: viii). The Commission defined the nature of contemporary racism:

It may be based on colour and physical features or on culture, nationality and way of life; it may affirm equality of human worth but implicitly deny this by insisting on

the absolute superiority of a particular culture; it may admit equality up to a point but impose a glass ceiling higher up. Whatever its subtle disguises and forms, it is deeply divisive, intolerant of differences, source of much human suffering and inimical to the common sense of belonging lying at the basis of every stable political community. (Parekh, 2000: ix)

Contemporary racism has also kept pace with changing concepts. Discarding racial prejudice grounded in biology, the 'new racism' which emerged in the late twentieth century relies on the idea of cultural incompatibility (Barker, 1981). Instead of an appeal to 'race', the beliefs and customs of different ethnic groups are characterised as irreconcilable with those of the majority white British population. In other words, those using cultural incompatibility as a justification for curbing immigration have made their language neutral, when in fact their target is still visible minorities (Miles & Brown, 2004: 112). On closer inspection it is arguable that the 'new racism' is simply camouflage for the crudity of biological racism. The preface to Parekh (2000) captures the multifaceted nature of present-day racism

Parekh (2000) distinguishes between street racism and institutional racism. The first consists of overt racism such as abusive language, criminal damage and physical assault – acts usually perpetrated in public spaces. Modood et al. (1997) found in a survey of over 5,000 people from ethnic-minority households that 12% of them had suffered racial abuse within the previous year. For 1% of all those questioned this consisted of a physical assault, while for 2% their property was damaged in a racist attack. In the same survey one in five white people admitted to being racially prejudiced against those of Caribbean origin and one in four against those of Asian descent. Addressing the police force, a report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary stressed that '...to be a victim because of skin colour multiplies the emotional and psychological hurt well beyond that of the physical pain' (Blakey & Crompton, 2000: 45). According to Parekh (2000: 128), this is because racism is an attack upon 'the values, loyalties and commitments central to a person's sense of identity and self-worth – their family, honour, friends, culture, heritage, religion, community, history'. This is particularly true for Asian Muslims who, after the destruction of the Twin Towers in 2001 and the suicide bombings in London during 2005, are increasingly subject to Islamophobia. This form of racism is based on colour, religion and the belief that the Muslim community supports terrorism. Police recorded over 1,200 suspected Islamophobic incidents nationwide in the first three weeks after the bombings on London's transport system on 7 July 2005. These consisted of verbal abuse, arson attacks on mosques and physical assaults on people suspected of being Muslim (*Observer*, 2005; *Guardian*, 2005). The Muslim Safety Forum reported a 500% increase in 'faith-based' attacks across London during July 2005 as compared with the same period in the previous year (BBC, 2005a). More wide reaching than the racist acts perpetrated by individuals is institutional racism, which received unprecedented public attention during the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry.

### The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry

Stephen Lawrence, a black youth, was stabbed to death in the street on 22 April 1993 by a group of five white youths in an unprovoked racist attack. The ensuing police investigation produced just a single witness and no one was publicly prosecuted for the murder. Stephen's parents made a number of complaints because of the slow progress of the case. As a result of media attention, a public inquiry was opened in 1997 to examine the failure of the police to properly investigate the racially motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence. The Inquiry concluded that racist attitudes within the Metropolitan Police Service had obstructed an efficient investigation. It also produced a comprehensive and oft-quoted definition of institutional racism:

The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviours which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. (Macpherson, 1999: para. 6.34)

Institutional racism can take many forms. It includes negative stereotyping of people from ethnic minorities, patronising language or actions due to ignorance of a person's culture, the inequitable treatment of people from ethnic minorities and the failure to take into consideration an individual's cultural background. Institutional racism can be inferred from the overwhelming evidence revealed by national statistics and research studies on the experience of ethnic minorities in relation to education, employment, housing, health and criminal-justice.

## Education and Ethnic Minorities

It is important to recognise that table 1.1 below does not present a simple picture of underachievement by black and Asian students relative to their white peer group. There is plainly divergence between the genders and various ethnic minorities in terms of academic accomplishment. Overall, students with Indian and Chinese backgrounds are higher academic achievers than those who are White British. Within these ethnic groups, females tend to obtain better results compared with males. Black Caribbean males do particularly badly academically. Those with mixed white and Caribbean heritage also do poorly, compared with white pupils. Although these statistics indicate that discrimination contributes to the underachievement of students from ethnic minorities, there are evidently other processes at work.

Initially, government policy addressed poor academic results among ethnic minorities by assuming that these were the consequence of cultural deficits such as family structure



**Table 1.1 2004 GCSE results for ethnic minorities**

Ethnic Group and Gender	Percentage of 15-year-olds in England achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A–C in 2004
Chinese females	79
Indian females	72
Chinese males	70
Indian males	62
White British females	57
Pakistani females	52
White British males	47
White & Black Caribbean females	45
Black Caribbean females	44
Pakistani males	39
White & Black Caribbean males	34
Black Caribbean males	27

Source: Department for Education and Skills (2005a: Table 3)

and customs. The official response was to assimilate pupils into the education system by insisting that they adjust. This strategy was part of a wider agenda to absorb ethnic minorities into mainstream society and ensure that they did not remain distinctive from the majority white population (Gillborn, 1990: 142–6). The failure of this policy to improve the academic performance of ethnic-minority pupils led to the adoption of multicultural education which explicitly acknowledges and values diverse cultural backgrounds.

However, evidence suggests that students from ethnic minorities are still treated differently on the basis of stereotypes, which many teachers from the white majority hold. For example, African-Caribbean boys are assumed to be trouble-makers or thought only able to excel on the sports field, while Asian girls are supposed to be passive and compliant. These stereotypes alter the behaviour of teachers in ways which reinforce underachievement for African-Caribbean boys and Pakistani or Bangladeshi girls (Gillborn, 1990: 113–14; Troyna & Carrington, 1990: 50–5). Labelling of black males as disruptive also explains the disproportionate numbers of black pupils who are excluded from schools.

### School exclusions

Figures produced by the Social Exclusion Unit show that:

- 0.58% of African-Caribbean pupils were excluded
- 0.15% of White pupils were excluded
- 0.04% of Indian pupils were excluded
- 0.03% of Chinese pupils were excluded

(SEU, 2000a: Table 2)

A greater percentage of African-Caribbean pupils are excluded than are white pupils. It is also important to note that children from other ethnic minorities, such as those of Indian or Chinese heritage, were actually less likely to be excluded than white children. Clearly there are differences in the experiences of pupils from ethnic minorities in terms of academic achievement and school exclusions. They cannot simply be lumped in together and assumed to be subject to the same kinds of discrimination.

Despite evidence of racism in schools (Gillborn, 1990; Mirza, 1992), Asian and black students in the 18–24 years age range are actually over-represented in universities as a proportion of their numbers in the population. Overall, those from ethnic minorities are 50% more likely to obtain a university place than applicants from the majority white community. This reflects the perseverance of individual students from ethnic-minority backgrounds to achieve university-entry requirements. It also hides the fact that the vast majority of ethnic-minority students are concentrated in the ‘new universities’ rather than the more prestigious ‘red brick’ universities which can in turn reduce their career prospects (Modood, 2003: 61). In terms of achievement in higher education, 14% of those identifying as Chinese obtained a higher degree while only 5.1% of the white population held such a qualification. The proportion of the working population who were black, Asian or of mixed heritage holding a higher degree was similar to that of the white majority (Department for Education and Skills, 2005b: Table 1).

## Employment and Ethnic Minorities

The first generation of post-war immigrant workers from South Asia and the Caribbean were predominantly from rural backgrounds and tended to be concentrated in low-paid jobs in transport, the textile industries and the health service. Their adult children, although born and educated in Britain, continue to be over-represented in unskilled and semi-skilled work. During the 1970s ‘African-Asian’ refugees expelled from the newly independent states of East Africa also arrived in Britain. Many of these refugees were highly educated professionals and came to Britain with substantial economic means at their disposal. Often they set up their own successful business enterprises. Highly qualified asylum seekers and economic migrants continue to settle in the United Kingdom, bringing with them considerable experience. Despite the advantages of many people from ethnic minorities, given their educational and professional qualifications, they experience higher unemployment rates and lower-paid occupations than the majority white population. Analysis of Labour Force Survey figures by SEU (2000b: 92) show that while less than 4% of the white population with a degree were out of work, this rose to 6% of Asian graduates and around 12% of African Caribbeans.

### The Parekh Report

The Commission identified the disadvantaged position of ethnic minorities in the work-force and summarised their position as:

...over-represented in low-paid and insecure jobs; [they] have lower wages than the national average; and often work antisocial hours in unhealthy or dangerous environments. Many are not working at all. The underlying causes include industrial restructuring and a range of discriminatory practices by employers. Among individuals who are in work, many have good or excellent qualifications. They nevertheless have greater difficulty than white people with the same qualifications in gaining the most sought-after jobs – the top 10 per cent of jobs are denied to them by various subtle glass ceilings. (Parekh, 2000: 192–3)

As revealed in Table 1.2, there are substantial differences in unemployment rates as between ethnic groups and the majority white population. These figures also disguise the higher levels of part-time employment among some ethnic groups. Part-time work among men from the Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black African communities is two to three times higher than among white males. For women, part-time employment is much more evenly distributed across ethnic groups, with around one-third of all women undertaking work on this basis. Doubtless this reflects their greater domestic and child-care responsibilities (Heath & Cheung, 2006: 13). It is also significant that 23% of those identifying as ethnically Chinese and 25% of those identifying as Pakistani are self-employed as compared with just under 7% of white people. This substantially reduces potential unemployment among these ethnic groups and thus it being reflected in official statistics. Furthermore, as compared with white people, unemployment rates among ethnic minorities are 'hyper-cyclical', meaning that in times of recession jobs are lost to those from ethnic minorities at a much faster rate than to those from the majority white population. This is because they are over-represented in casual and unskilled or semi-skilled jobs which tend to be lost first in times of recession (Jones, 1993: 112–23).

There are a number of explanations as to why people from ethnic minorities do less well in the job market. There is evidence that, for some, poorer language skills in English are an obstacle to employment (Gray et al., 1993; Modood et al., 1997: 87). Though this fails to explain the finding that there is no appreciable difference in the employment prospects of first- and second-generation immigrants, despite the fact that those growing up in Britain will almost certainly have fluency in English (Heath & McMahon, 1997; Heath & Cheung, 2006: 2). Nor does it explain why those from Indian and Chinese minorities are better qualified than those from the majority white community and yet are not proportionately represented in higher-paid occupations (Parekh, 2000: 194).

Explaining these contradictions, an important study by Brown and Gray (1985) found that, despite the Race Relations Act 1976 outlawing racial discrimination, many