

Hard-to-reach minorities: Challenges for Interaction and Research

Dear reader of Streit&Struntz,

Political decision-making and conflict management processes often do not reflect the diversity of the population in municipalities. For example, only just under a quarter of the councillors in German medium-sized cities are female¹. Less than four per cent of councillors in large German cities have a migration biography². Other groups of people, such as young people, senior citizens, the socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged, ethnic minorities or the homeless, are often underrepresented and have difficulties bringing their interests and needs into the debates. For this reason, Local Conflict Counselling set itself the goal of integrating all those involved in the conflict counselling processes. However, access is often difficult, especially for groups of people who are not organised in formal structures. How can these people still be reached so that they can bring in their concerns and ideas?

*In his research on the Bangladeshi diaspora in Germany, **Azizur Rahman Khan** is often confronted with similar questions. In his text below, he describes barriers that prevented potential interviewees in his research from agreeing to an interview. Finally, he gives a few recommendations on how access can sometimes work out or be facilitated:*

The data-gathering plan for the action research project “Understanding and working together on the challenges of social integration” was designed to reach both individuals and self-organization formed by the Bangladeshi Diaspora. In the process of analysis, it was relatively easy to contact the self-organizations, nevertheless, there were difficulties to contact many individuals who were isolated, secluded, and inaccessible for various reasons.

For example, women (housewives) who spend most of their time inside the home or people working in restaurant kitchens who have limited opportunity to meet people and little time for the family due to their job responsibilities were difficult to reach for interviews. There are some who were not willing to give interviews and who were not interested in a discussion on integration. There were also others, who were afraid of any discussion due to fear that it may have negative consequences for their lives.

Primarily, the difficulties of data gathering from target groups could be viewed as a methodological challenge. However, the experience with the hard-to-reach phenomenon is also indicative of various individual, social, and cultural barriers of interactions and eventually challenges for social integration. Therefore, the question of ‘hard-to-reach’-minorities is not only a methodological challenge for data gathering but a general one concerning questions of accessibility and seclusion, and factors which limit or prohibit the choice of interaction and integration.

Streit&Struntz - Raum für Denkanstöße zu kommunalen Konflikten provides an impetus for new thinking on conflicts in the communal space once a month: on the first Friday of every month with a written impulse and on one of the following Mondays (4-5 p.m.) in an online discussion with which the topic is deepened.

The Kompetenzzentrum Kommunale Konfliktberatung des VFB Salzwedel e.V. thus creates a dialogue format for exchange between conflict management practice, conflict counselling and academia.

¹ https://kommunalwiki.boell.de/index.php/Repräsentation_von_Frauen_in_der_Kommunalpolitik

² <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/kommunalpolitik-warum-kaum-migranten-in-deutschen-100.html>

Factors of inaccessibility, seclusion, isolation, disconnectedness, and cultural cut-off

There are various 'objective' and 'subjective' factors contributing to the scope and opportunity to interaction or isolation. There are also social and cultural push and pull factors that limit the choice and opportunity to interaction.

1. Language Skills

The absence of German language fluency is a known barrier for basic communication in Germany and it plays a significant role in social interactions. In many cases, it is not only the German but also other languages such as English that are very poor in many Bangladeshi individuals, especially women.

Women who are busy with small children and household chores are usually not able to continue their language training, and eventually get culturally cut-off. In one interview, a woman talked about her experiences of dropping out of the German language school due to being pregnant and subsequent household and childcare activities. Here, the objective family condition created a barrier of going to the language school. As a consequence, she became more isolated. By giving up the language courses she lost her opportunity of meeting other students from other countries, and also the language skills crucial for communication in Germany.

Poor language skills do not automatically mean isolation or seclusion. Several women have their own online business for the Bangladeshi diaspora where they can interact with their mother tongue (Bengali). As a consequence, they may interact with the people of their own community but not with the others.

Many men who are working in restaurant kitchens and factories and have very poor or limited language skills are as well cut off from any meaningful communication with other cultures.

2. Values & Practices

One very crucial factor are the values and practices people inherit and carry into their life. Some of these values are also based on religious perceptions.

An interview with a young mother was revealing. When she was asked whether she admitted her children to a day-care centre, she reacted with strong opposition to sending her child to the day-care centre.

"No (she said very firmly). I don't want to send my children to day-care centres. I know that they are good. But they cannot provide the care, I, as a mother, could give them. I sent them to the kindergarten after each of them turned three."

Not all Bangladeshi women would agree with her. In another interview, a housewife was talking about her vocational training and her positive perception of childcare. While one mother cites cultural norms and that 'childcare is the sole responsibility of a mother', the other one is challenging that perception. It may be interesting to note that the 'objective condition' is not without choice and living in a similar kind of patriarchal structure and culture does not mean that all abide by it. Bangladeshi Diaspora women have agency, and many opted for their own choice.

Many women are going out shopping alone. On the contrary, there are women who go out shopping or visit doctors only with their husbands or with male guardians. Social interaction is considered a 'male responsibility'.

3. Work pressure and time constrains

Several individuals have denied the requests for giving interviews by explaining their busy working schedules and time pressure. One of the restaurant workers put it quite explicitly:

"I have one day off, working till late at night and only one day I can go for shopping with my wife and children. Please forgive me, brother, I have no time for the interview. Maybe you get others who have time."

The interviewer met him twice in a restaurant where he is working. It was not possible to sit and continue talking because he was serving other guests. In between, he told the story about his coming to Germany, his family, and his work in the restaurants. After two days of the informal meeting when he was asked for a structured interview, he politely declined.

Besides restaurant workers, there are others who also declined due to their work pressure and choice for spending time with family.

4. Religious Identity Perceptions

Religious identity perceptions are a complex phenomenon, and at the same time the most important factor for seclusion and motivation for cultural isolation.

The Bangladeshi family culture, which is defined as patriarchal, is shaped or informed by religious consciousness. For example, prohibiting girls to meet people from other ethnicities or nations has an underlying religious understanding. The idea is that getting married to non-Muslims is not allowed in the religion. Then there are issues about 'Halal'-food. It is a general perception that other religious people will not serve 'Halal'- food.

It is also not always easy to get access to informal Islamist groups. Attempts to interview them as part of the research were not successful. A contact person who was asked to arrange an interview with some of the group members declined by referring to the status of the interviewer as a secular person:

"I think they will not give any interviews. Why would they talk to you? They already know that you are a secular person. They will be rather suspicious."

However, it is not difficult to contact formal groups like Islamic e.V. or the community leaders who are leading the Mosque committee.

5. Fear of negative consequences

There is a Bangladeshi religious minority 'Hindu'-community in Berlin that has organized 'Durga Puja', the most celebrated religious festival of Bengali Hindus. One of the organisers who had initially accepted an interview, declined suddenly on the day of the interview. He did not want to talk about his opinion on integration challenges in Germany:

"My father told me, that I should not involve with anything political. Please forgive me, come and visit our temple but I don't want to talk about religious issues."

Although he has been assured that his name will not be published, he was alarmed when he realized that the discussion turned to the internal dynamics and conflict within Bangladeshi Diaspora.

Here, the context of Bangladesh is relevant to mention. The communal violence to minorities influences the Bangladeshi diaspora abroad, especially among religious minorities. A Bangladeshi from a Hindu religious background explained that he is not afraid that something will happen to him in Germany but if it is known that he is active in here, maybe his family in Bangladesh suffer severe consequences.

The strategy of contact, communication, and interaction with 'hard-to-reach'

1. **Native speaking researcher:** In the action research with the Bangladeshi Diaspora, a native speaking (Bengali) researcher was appointed. The decision of engaging native-speaking researchers seems effective. It was useful for contact and access to native-speaking individuals who have poor language skills, and it contributes to a deeper understanding of the diaspora cultural context and conflicts within.

2. **Female Interviewer:** Access to secluded women, especially housewives proved to be effective by female interviewers. Besides, it was tried to get access through women community leaders but in some cases, it failed. So, it is not only a female researcher but also needs rapport building and a careful plan of timing and preparation.
3. **'Non-Muslim'- interviewer:** It is interesting to note that leaders of religious organisations and individuals are apparently more open to German or non-Muslim researchers, as compared to secular (Muslim) Bangladeshi interviewers. One reason may be their general perception that 'outsiders' will not ask critical or unpleasant questions. Second, the non-Muslim interviewer will not challenge the interpretation of religion but a secular Muslim interviewer may challenge the interviewee.
4. **Second-generation diaspora youth:** Information about second-generation diaspora such as their integration needs is easier collected from their parents.

The role of self-organisations is key

The problem of 'hard to reach'-minorities was experienced in the diaspora research as a 'methodological' concern. However, the reasons for this problem are diverse, such as the community context and underlying latent conflicts within patriarchy, ethnic and religious identities, class and cultural perceptions and power relations. It would be hard to access these people from outside, without community engagement. Therefore, the best way to address the problems of 'hard to reach'-minorities is by involving and strengthening self-organization, especially secular ones.

*In the online discussion on **Monday 14 March 2022, from 4-5pm**, we would like to engage with you and discuss: What do these findings mean for Local Conflict Counselling? What other barriers can be described that make it difficult to reach people? And what experience has already been gained in working in a power-critical and sensitive way to enable more people to get involved in processes of local conflict resolution?*

*We are looking forward to a short first input by **Azizur Rahman Khan** (scientific advisor of the Kompetenzzentrum Kommunale Konfliktberatung). Afterwards, **Luise Veit** (freelance conflict counsellor) will comment on what has been said against the background of her experience in counselling processes in local conflict counselling and share her thoughts on the topic.*

We cordially invite you to ask your own questions, to comment and to join in the discussion.

The online conversation will take place via Zoom. Please register for the online discussion by e-mail (streitundstrutz.konfliktberatung@vfb-saw.de) or via the button in the newsletter. The access link for the Zoom event will be sent to all registered persons by e-mail shortly before the event begins.

In the spirit of breaking down barriers, we will dare to experiment and hold this event bilingually. Presentations, questions or comments in German will be translated using automatic translation and presented via English subtitles and vice versa. Don't hesitate to participate if you are not fluent in one of the two languages!

The Kompetenzzentrum Kommunale Konfliktberatung offers support to cities, municipalities, and districts in dealing with acute or latent conflicts. The methodological approach of Local Conflict Counselling provides for an all-party, resource-oriented procedure geared towards effectiveness and sustainability.

Further information: www.vfb-saw.de/kommunale_konfliktberatung_im_vfb_salzwedel/

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Diese Maßnahme wird mitfinanziert durch Steuermittel auf der Grundlage des vom Sächsischen Landtag beschlossenen Haushaltes.



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