

The experience of racist victimisation

Racist harassment is well researched in terms of its nature and extent. However, what is less well understood is the impact that it has on all aspects of people's lives beyond the actual racist experience itself. Further, the experiences of victims are poorly reflected in research and policy development. A study of the impact of racist experiences on individuals and families in four areas in the UK, conducted by Kusminder Chahal and Louis Julienne, found that:

- f** The experience of racism had become part of the everyday experience of black and minority ethnic people contacted. Being made to feel different in a variety of social situations and locations was largely seen as routine and in some instances expected. Racist abuse was the most common form of everyday racism.
- f** Racist experiences were not always reported immediately to an agency with a professional obligation to investigate the complaint; usually only physical attacks were immediately reported. Generally, reporting was considered as an option when the harassment becomes intolerable or the problem has escalated.
- f** Those experiencing racist victimisation readily disclosed to selected external family members and friends for advice and support. The General Practitioner was also an important confidante and acted as a source of validation of experiences and the consequence of such experiences.
- f** There was limited support for victims of racist harassment. They felt ignored, unheard and unprotected. Friends and family visited less often or stopped visiting altogether once the problems became known. The feedback from agencies was irregular. Such factors added to the cycle of isolation.
- f** The consequences of racist harassment went beyond the actual events themselves. All members of the targeted family were affected. The impact affected not only close family relations but also how the family interacted with the wider community and environment.
- f** In the face of limited support and intervention, the families adopted strategic measures to reduce and limit the impact of racist harassment on their daily lives. This included better security around the home, changing routines or developing plans within the family to continue a 'normal' life.

Background

There is little qualitative information on how people experience and live with racist victimisation. The general method of investigation has been quantitative and this has drowned out the voices and experiences of those who have been victimised. This research examined the effects of racist harassment and also the ways in which black and minority ethnic people develop strategies to manage and reduce the incidence of racist victimisation where they live, in the face of limited external support.

The pervasive nature of everyday racism

Black and minority ethnic people involved in this research were all able to provide at least one account of racist harassment. More often than not full accounts of racist experiences could not be given because they were, through the course of life, too numerous to remember:

"I think everybody has been here for such a long time that they have learnt to adapt to their environment. You have been conditioned throughout your life to accept this as normal."

Racist experiences over a time period became interconnected incidents which people then used to make assessments of the risk to themselves as black and minority ethnic people:

"People think they can get away with it. They have an ingrained thing about superiority. I can prevent certain eventualities like I don't go to a certain area or, for example, I don't use public transport at night. You don't put yourself in a situation where it is going to be hassle."

Experiencing racist harassment

The experiences of racist harassment were explained in terms of respondents being perceived as different. There were various ways in which this was articulated but the main reference was to colour. Children and young people were often identified as both the perpetrators and the victims of racist harassment. The perpetrators often had the approval of their parents, which generally exacerbated the situation:

"There was this kid who used to kick our door. Our next door neighbour went to see his parents and the kid's mother was yelling and swearing and threatening our neighbour saying that she'll do more than kick your door down. I'll come and do this and that to your kids."

The children and young people who were experiencing racist victimisation often lost their freedom to play around their home because parents

felt unsure about their safety. In some cases, children were even forced to change their play routines in their home because of the constant threat of and often actual complaints of neighbours:

"We have a daughter and a son who are 11 and 8. When she was going to play it was 'you are a paki bastard' and 'go and get yourself washed'. Every time she stepped out of the door, I mean she would be going from here to her friends, they would be there. Now the mother is just as bad and we were all 'paki bastards'. I came in from work at night and my daughter was in her bed crying. She asked 'why are they calling me names'. It was getting to the stage that she didn't like who she was."

In deciding whether an incident or incidents were racist, the individual and/or family cited racist abuse as a key measure of motivation of the perpetrator. Other signs were racist graffiti and whether white neighbours were also getting trouble.

Family disclosure

Racist experiences in and around the home affected all members of the family. However, in some instances the husband/partner may not have endured the daily racist harassment experienced by other members of the family because he or she was out at work. This often created conflict between spouses because the employed partner did not readily understand the problems the family was having.

Discussions were often held within the family being victimised about the racist experiences. Parents often acted as informal reporting stations for their children and offered advice and support. In some instances disclosure by children led to parents taking immediate action. However, in other cases parental advice was for the family to avoid confrontation.

Individuals and families did disclose to other friends and family (not residing in the household). However, they were very selective about who they told outside the immediate family unit because of feelings of shame and inadequacy:

"I've had my granddad here and my cousin in the house until 11 o'clock at night without telling them why [for protection]."

Often disclosure to family members outside of the immediate unit led to unhelpful comment and remarks being made or even the withdrawal of support:

"I don't have visitors hardly because most of my friends are mothers and they are not prepared to come up here. Not even my relatives. People don't want to tell me 'I'm not coming to visit you' but they don't."

Reporting to an agency

Reporting to a relevant agency was rarely the first response after an incident. Reporting was viewed as a strategy only when people felt that they could not take any more harassment and abuse, the problem was getting worse, it was becoming life-threatening or there had been serious property damage and physical attack. Thus reporting an incident at some stage was a form of accessing support, ultimately for stopping the racist harassment.

The delay in reporting immediately was largely because people were prepared to monitor what was going on around them:

“I lived there hoping that they will just maybe give up. I thought they might just get fed up with it and stop altogether.”

Agencies to whom incidents were reported often questioned the racist motivation or victims' perception of events. This added to the sense of isolation and lack of support the victim generally felt, particularly if they were living in predominately white estates. Nearly one quarter of those interviewed did not report to any official agency until after 18 months of the racist victimisation starting. In some cases the incidents went on for over 4 years before official complaints were made. Many people reporting to the police or housing organisations were not referred to any other agency for support or advice.

Amongst the range of sources to report incidents, the local GP was a popular point of disclosure. The GP was approached for three reasons. First, as a source of help; the GP was frequently asked to write a letter to the local housing department/association to explain the effects of racist harassment on the family. Second, the GP responded to the impact of racist victimisation by providing medication, for example, for depression or to help people sleep. Finally, the GP acted as a confidante:

“She [GPI] explained everything to me and listened to me. That was all I needed was someone there to listen to me and she was there for me. She was the only one.”

The impact of racist victimisation

The fear and risk of being a victim of racist harassment shaped how people interacted with the wider environment. A reluctance to leave the home, not letting the children play outside, not going out at night and a raised anxiety about when the next attack would happen all conspired to reduce the quality of life and well being of black and minority ethnic people. However, there were also impacts on spousal relations, particularly regarding whose

decision it was to move to the area where the family was being victimised.

The impact on children was possibly greater than on adults because in some instances they were also experiencing the racist harassment at school and on the journey to and from school. The perpetrators of the harassment thus determined the way they were able to use public space:

“My daughter feels really isolated and she actually goes to an after school club so that I can have her being with other children. I am not going to bring her here everyday at three in the afternoon and have her locked in the house.”

Family and friends tended to visit less once they knew of the problems. This adds to the sense of isolation and despair. Taken for granted routine activities became major tasks involving avoidance of the perpetrators. Simple daily tasks like hanging out the washing and putting the rubbish out became negotiated risk-taking events. In some cases, such basic activities were only undertaken in darkness when the victims knew the perpetrators would not be around:

“I get called paki lover when I have been hanging the washing out. I hang my washing out late at night ready for the next day to save meeting her in the morning.”

The weather and the time of the year all have an impact on the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Summers are generally dreaded because it means more people hanging around for longer:

“I was so happy when it was raining and when it was dark because the kids were not playing out. But when the summer or half term came I used to dread it. All the racists would come out.”

The impact on health and well-being was quite profound. The majority of people were not physically attacked but the consequences of racist victimisation had changed their lives. Throughout the interviews talk of anger, stress, depression, sleepless nights were common and recurring themes.

In a number of cases families had given up their homes and become homeless rather than face continued victimisation.

Preventing racist victimisation

Those on the receiving end of racist victimisation did not passively accept what was happening to them. They were pro-active in drawing up strategies to halt or prevent the harassment. People complained to a variety of agencies and to the families of perpetrators as well as challenging the perpetrators themselves.

Other strategies were also deployed. For example, the first reaction in prevention was to ignore and avoid the perpetrators. Changing daily routines was a key method by which people protected themselves and their families and created a level of normality within the home.

Creating physical deterrents around the home were also part of a strategy of prevention. Erecting high fences to mask the home from the perpetrators was seen as an important deterrent, as was putting up security lights. Others used technology such as video cameras and dictaphones.

In many cases people stopped leaving their home unoccupied. People could not go out for longer than a few hours, could not take holidays or could not feel secure enough to undertake ordinary activities. They developed elaborate strategies to create some form of normality and to avoid the perpetrators:

“Two of us went shopping together, always. Two of us had to be in the house to defend the others. We used to be scared going home. We used to phone mum and say ‘mum I am coming round the corner. Please look out of the window.’ We always had to carry change for the phone in case something happened. We had to let the family know what shops we were going to so if we were late they could go and check. Everything was really organised.”

Conclusion

The research highlights the impact of racist victimisation as being far more complicated than the experience itself. It affects every aspect of a family or individual's life. People are not always heard or listened to, responded to adequately or supported effectively. The sense of isolation from friends and family as well as agencies creates an intolerable atmosphere in the lives of the victimised. Against this backdrop, people look to their own resources to manage and respond to the racist victimisation in the circumstances in which it arises.

Racist victimisation is about the accumulation of negative experiences which affect people's day-to-day decision-making. People being victimised establish their own informal multi-agency initiatives. They approach a variety of agencies by themselves and not because a particular agent has recommended such a route. Despite this, however, they generally felt isolated and abandoned with little or no practical or psychological support.

The researchers conclude that there is a disjunction between the experience of the victimised and the policy response of agencies to whom this experience is reported. To those on the receiving end of it, racist victimisation occurs not at an extraordinary level revolving around a particular incident. Rather,

incidents occur against a backdrop of everyday, routine level of racist harassment which official agencies fail to take into account. Hence when people do make a complaint they find that the victim's perspective is the first to disappear and their experiences are not taken seriously or responded to in a manner appropriate to their circumstances.

About the study

The research covers the experiences of 74 people in Belfast, Cardiff, Glasgow and London using focus groups and in-depth interviews. Attempts were made to ensure that all tenures were represented. The general aim was to hold discussions in focus groups concentrating on all experiences of racism from people who may or may not have reported incidents to an appropriate authority. The in-depth interviews were held with people who had been victimised in and around their home and had reported these incidents.

How to get further information

The full report, “We can't all be white!": Racist victimisation in the UK by Kusminder Chahal and Louis Julienne, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 38 5, price £12.95 plus £2 p&p).