

# Understanding Racist Violence

Larry Ray, David Smith and Liz Wastell summarise their research on perpetrators of racist violence.

**W**e have recently completed research on the perpetrators of racist violence in Greater Manchester, and this article aims to summarise our provisional conclusions. The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of the Violence Research Programme, and latterly by the Greater Manchester Probation Service. Overall, the research ran over a period of 30 months.

We started with two basic ideas: that we should try to understand the motives of perpetrators of relatively serious racist attacks, rather than focusing on 'routine' acts of harassment and abuse, such as those described by Sibbitt (1997); and that we should explore the connections between the motives of individual perpetrators of racist attacks with racist sentiments in the communities from which they came (the importance of these connections is stressed by Hewitt 1996). We were also interested in the responses of the police, the probation service and other agencies to local problems of racist violence.

The research officer for the project, Liz Wastell, who had worked for some years as a probation officer in Greater Manchester, aimed to make contact with perpetrators of racist attacks

through colleagues in the probation service. We had been assured that this would be reasonably straightforward and that we would not encounter the difficulties reported by Sibbitt (1997) in contacting racist offenders via probation officers, because policy in Greater Manchester was to confront racist motivation rather than discourage its expression in the name of political correctness. In the event, we found it much harder than we had hoped to obtain a reasonable sample of offenders who had committed assaults with a clear racist motivation. Probation officers' responses to their clients' racist attitudes turned out to be highly variable: while some were clearly committed to making these an explicit target for change, others seemed nervous about approaching

Asian perpetrators.

Eventually we obtained useable interview data from over 40 offenders who had committed assaults in which there was some indication of a racist motive. Typically these were young men who had convictions for other types of crime. They tended to live in outlying parts of Greater Manchester with high levels of unemployment and deprivation, and few if any ethnic minority residents - essentially, in poor white estates. They shared many of the characteristics of other samples of known offenders: most were unemployed, two-thirds had no educational qualifications, and many came from disrupted family backgrounds. Very few could articulate a racist ideology in political terms, and most were only

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the subject, apparently fearing that it might jeopardise their relationship with the client. We also found that the police response to racist attacks varied across areas. In Collyhurst in North Manchester, for example, the police sustained an active inter-agency group, including representatives of the main ethnic minorities, that monitored police effectiveness in dealing with reported racist incidents (Ray *et al.*, 1999). However, in Oldham, which consistently recorded the highest number of such incidents of all the Greater Manchester police divisions, inter-agency activity had effectively ceased, and the single largest category of recorded 'racial incidents' involved complaints by white victims of alleged South

vaguely aware of the existence of racist organisations and what they stood for. The interviews revealed recurrent themes: resentment, a sense of being devalued and even victimised, an idealised, stereotypical view of what they invariably referred to as 'Paki' culture and business success, and a readiness to see violence as a routine solution to problems and conflict. Interviewees talked of being overlooked and ignored, and of how 'white English' culture was devalued and rendered invisible in comparison with the vivid and attractive attributes of ethnic minority cultures. Multi-cultural and anti-racist education had not been effective. In some cases this was because the interviewees had been absent from school for long periods, in others because the effect of this education was to reinforce a sense of resentment and defiance in young people who had already rejected, or been rejected by, the school and its values. They contrasted their own economic failure with the perceived success

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of South Asians, which they regarded as the product of close family ties and undeserved favourable treatment by the authorities, not as the result of hard work. In the areas where they tended to live, many of the shops, garages and taxi businesses were Asian-owned and run, so that most or all of their contacts with Asians were commercial. They tended to commit their offences after they had been drinking, and in reaction to a perceived slight or challenge to their control of the situation. We might understand these offences as being committed in contexts when various cultural resources become available for mobilisation: resentment, violence, and a set of barely conscious racist attitudes and assumptions shared in large part with other residents of their home areas.

Our research suggests, then, that most acts of serious racist violence in Greater Manchester are committed by young men who are not in any meaningful sense politically aware. Indeed, it is striking how often interviewees wanted to defend themselves against the charge of being 'real' racists: for them, racism is a badge of shame, not pride. The emotion of shame has been associated with anger and violence by a number of scholars, notably Scheff (1994), and the accounts in the interviews of feeling devalued and belittled suggest that this may be a fruitful way of understanding the emotional content of violent racism. At the rational, cognitive level, many of the interviewees recognised that racism was morally unacceptable. Some technique of neutralisation was therefore

required in the immediate situation of the violent act, such as a view of the victim as undeserving of respect, or a claim that the violence was a response to provocation, as when the victim refused to accept exploitation or intimidation passively. In this context, the underlying emotion may erupt in sudden violence, an expression of deep-seated resentment and hostility directed against those who are definably different and are perceived as (unfairly) more successful than oneself.

The understanding of racist violence we are tentatively developing has implications for the practice and policy of the probation service, the police, schools, and all organisations concerned with racist aggression and violence. One important message is that the racist motivation of violence will often not be obvious and overt. In developing preventive strategies, if racist violence has powerful emotional roots, as we suggest, then a purely educative, rational approach will not be sufficient. Work aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviour of racist offenders will need to attend to the emotional charge behind the violence, and the best hope of interrupting the reproduction of racism over time and across generations will lie in policies designed to reduce alienation, marginalisation and exclusion.

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