

The effect of racial harassment on people's lifestyle

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Introduction

Little is known about what Gordon (1989) has called the 'hidden injuries of racism', that is, how the lives of South Asian and African Caribbean people are affected beyond the actual harassment that takes place. The Home Affairs Committee (1989: viii) recognised it was an aspect of the problem that required attention when it recommended that

One priority should be to develop ways to reduce fear among ethnic minorities since the fear of racially motivated incidents, just as much as racial attacks and harassment themselves, casts a blight on the lives of members of ethnic minority communities in the UK.

The 1992 BCS asked whether respondents thought that racially motivated attacks were a problem in their area. Overall, it found few respondents who thought that racially motivated attacks were either a 'very' or 'fairly big' problem. Both African Caribbeans and South Asians were more likely than whites to think that they were a problem in their area. In particular, 18 per cent of South Asians and 12 per cent of African Caribbeans living in inner city areas thought that racially motivated attacks were a 'very' or 'fairly big' problem compared to 5 per cent of whites living in these areas. On the other hand, 10 per cent of both African Caribbeans and South Asians living outside the inner city areas thought that racially motivated attacks were a 'very' or 'fairly big' problem compared to 2 per cent of whites living in such areas (Aye Maung and Mirrlees-Black 1994: 11).

It is also worth looking at the 1992 British Crime Survey findings in relation to the fear of crime. The term 'fear of crime' is widely used as a convenient shorthand for emotional reactions ranging from mild concern to pervasive anxiety that result from awareness of the risk of experiencing crime (Mirrlees-Black and Aye Maung 1994: 2). The authors note that measuring the fear of crime is a subject of much debate. The 1992 BCS attempted to measure this 'fear of crime' by asking respondents how

worried they were about falling victim to specific crimes. In addition, they were also asked about how safe they felt out alone at night and at home at night. People tended to be more concerned about being out alone at night than being at home alone at night. Overall, 32 per cent said they would feel 'very' or 'fairly' unsafe when walking out alone at night compared to 11 per cent who said they felt 'very' or 'fairly' unsafe when at home alone at night. The 1992 BCS also found that 'Asians and Afro-Caribbeans were more fearful than white respondents of being out alone after dark' (Mirrlees-Black and Aye Maung 1994: 2-4).

Adapting the way you lead your life because of the fear of being racially harassed

People in our study were asked whether they were constrained or had changed the way they lead their life because of the fear of being racially harassed, and then to describe fully the various ways in which they were.

Table 8 shows that one third, that is 24 of a total of 74 respondents felt that they were constrained in the way they led their life because of the fear of being racially harassed. The study also found a link between those people who had experienced some form of racial violence or harassment in the last 12 months and those who said the fear of racial harassment had affected the way they led their life. More than half, that is, 13 of the 22 individuals who had experienced some form of racial violence or harassment in the past year also said the fear of racial harassment had affected the way they led their life. Less than a quarter, that is, 11 of the 52 individuals who had not experienced any form of racial harassment in the past year said this. This seems to confirm the finding from the 1992 BCS that 'having been the

Table 8 The number of people who were constrained in the way they led their life because of the fear of being racially harassed (by ethnic group)

Ethnic group	Racial harassment affected lifestyle
Gujarati	7 out of 13
Punjabi	10 out of 13
Pakistani	1 out of 13
Bangladeshi	4 out of 10
African Caribbean	2 out of 25

n = 74

victim of crime oneself in the past is highly related to most of the fear measures' (Mirrlees-Black and Aye Maung 1994: 4).

Those respondents who said their life was constrained by the fear of being racially harassed were then asked to describe fully the ways in which this manifested itself.

Table 9 The ways in which people's lives were constrained by the fear of being racially harassed

The ways in which people's lives were constrained	The number of people whose lives were constrained by the fear of being racially harassed
Choosing a place to live	6
Constraints on going:	
- out at night near home	7
- to mainly white areas	8
- to places of entertainment	9
- on public transport	2
- to area of work/education	1

n = 24 (a number of individuals gave multiple answers)

Choosing a place to live

Six respondents said that the fear of being racially harassed had been a factor in determining the area in which they had decided to live. These six people, who were all South Asians, said it was important for them to live in an area with a high concentration of South Asians in order for them to feel safe. Some were fearful of being physically attacked or harassed if they went outside their 'own Asian area'. One woman explained how she became a victim of racial harassment almost immediately she moved from an ethnically-mixed area to one that was predominantly white. As she said: 'As soon as I go out of an Asian area, I'm faced with racism'.

On the other hand, some South Asian women explained that the fear of being racially harassed was compounded by the fear of being sexually harassed by some men of all ethnic groups. Consequently, they argued that they would feel just as unsafe living in areas with high concentrations of South Asians as in predominantly white residential areas.

Going out at night near home

One of the most important constraints imposed by the fear of being racially harassed was on going out at night, including in the area where the person lived. Seven people said they would not even consider going out at night for fear of being racially harassed and several said they felt 'like prisoners in their own home'. As one Gujarati woman explained:

This [the fear of racial harassment] has affected the way I live my life tremendously. We are not free to go anywhere, especially at night. You would always be afraid of being injured, having your car damaged or your family hurt.

Going to predominantly white residential areas

Eight respondents said they avoided going out to predominantly white residential areas for fear of being racially harassed. One Punjabi woman said she avoided such areas because she would be stopped and harassed by the police who would 'suspect she was up to mischief' because South Asians were not expected to be in the area.

Going out to places of entertainment

Nine individuals explained how they were reluctant to go to particular places of entertainment for fear of being racially harassed. Many of them said their socialising patterns were regularly constrained by the need to avoid venues where there would be large concentrations of white people present. All nine people cited the pub as a place they would feel uneasy about going to because of their fear of being racially harassed. One man explained how he avoided going to pubs in central London at weekends because he felt uncomfortable when waiting to meet friends since white people stared at him 'when I walk in, trying to work out if I am foreigner or not'. Similarly, a woman explained how she was made to feel uncomfortable in a pub because of the way white 'people are watching me. I am aware of my colour.' Several individuals mentioned that they avoided social arenas such as the cinema, nightclubs, restaurants and leisure centres, particularly at weekends. Finally, two individuals mentioned they would never go to football matches because of the fear of racial violence and harassment.

Going on public transport

Two women said they avoided travelling on the tubes and railways alone, particularly at night, because of their worry about being racially harassed.

Going to the area of work or place of study

One woman expressed her concern about being racially harassed in the area where she went to study. She explained how she often had to drive two miles away from the area to eat lunch and always made sure she left the college premises before it got dark. As she said:

You're weary of it [the fear of racial harassment] 24 hours a day. It's not a case of being able to change the way you look. You get up and look in the mirror and you're aware of it... in London, I do feel as though people are watching you all the time.

Minority ethnic response to the fear of racial harassment

Despite the obvious importance of establishing the scale and nature of racial violence and harassment facing minority ethnic people, it is equally important to recount how these people have actually sought to tackle and resist it. We saw in the introduction how people have established local anti-racist groups, including self defence groups in some areas to protect themselves from racial violence. In addition, they have continued to demand a more effective response in tackling the problem from official organisations such as the police and local councils.

It has just been outlined how many individuals have been forced to adapt the way they lead their life because of the fear of being racially harassed. On the other hand, several others in the study sought to address the problem in other ways. A number of individuals said they refused to let the fear of racial violence and harassment affect the way they lead their lives as adults. They argued that when they had been children, the fear of being racially harassed had forced them to lead very restricted lives with their parents preventing them from going outside their homes to play or engaging in any social activities. They felt strongly that they would not allow this to happen with their own children and that members of minority ethnic groups should actively tackle the racism that they faced. Three other individuals also said they would not let the fear of racial violence and harassment affect how they led their lives. One woman explained how this fear had been an important factor in many of her friends' decisions to choose which university they attended. However, she refused to take this into account:

I haven't really taken it as a factor because I don't feel I should have to choose where I want to study because of the colour I am. But I have got loads of friends who are at Birmingham, Leicester, Sheffield, because they know they will be safe with other Asians there.

Summary

Little is known about how the lives of South Asians and African Caribbean people are affected beyond the actual harassment they experience. The qualitative study revealed that about a third of all people said they were constrained in the way they led their life because of fear of being racially harassed. The fear of being racially harassed affected the quality of life that many of these people could live. It was an important factor for some in deciding where to live. It placed a number of restrictions on their social lives with some not prepared to go out at night even in or near the area they lived; while others were concerned about going out in areas where mostly white people lived; and some were not prepared to use public transport. However, it is important to emphasise that minority ethnic communities are not just passive victims of racial violence and harassment. Rather, it is a problem they tackle and actively resist. Several individuals in the qualitative study explained how they refused to let the fear of being racially harassed affect the way they lead their life as young adults in Britain.