

They Say: Oh, It's a Foreigner Who Made Trouble



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The phenomenon of racial violence and harassment aimed at immigrants and ethnic minorities has become increasingly evident throughout Europe during the 1990s. What kind of racism may be prevalent in Finland? Who are the victims and the perpetrators of racism? How do the victims cope with racism? Assuming one is interested in finding out how immigrants themselves perceive these issues, the natural thing to do is to put these questions to them. Creating a sense of commitment at such a level that people are prepared to get involved requires penetration of the prevailing realities of their lives and their perceptions of racism. Furthermore, it is important that different officials and community workers have knowledge of the issue of racism to tackle effectively those forms of racism that are not readily covered by existing statutes, but that nonetheless have a serious impact on the lives of immigrants.

Wieviorka (1991) distinguished four forms of racist action: prejudice, segregation, discrimination and racial violence. Back (1996) noted two areas in which racism is directed at immigrants. The first, called popular racism, refers to the experience of racism in daily contexts. Secondly, there are forms of racism that operate within

institutions. This notion was developed by Blauner (1972) to include all institutional processes and the chains of unwilling actions. According to Memmi (1987), the important factors regarding the social situation of immigrants are the various social mechanisms of discriminating and marginalising integration. Accordingly, the focus of studies on race and ethnicity has been those groups seen to be racialized: that is, defined as different in terms of ascribed racial characteristics, skin colour in particular (Bradley, 1996).

Racial violence and harassment may take several forms, ranging from relatively rare but serious incidents of murder and serious assaults to the more frequent incidents of racial abuse and threatening behavior (Virdee 1995). In the present study racial harassment is defined in line with the definition proposed by the Commission for Racial Equality (1987:8): Racial harassment is violence which may be verbal or physical and which includes attacks on property as well as on the person, suffered by individuals or groups because of their colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origins, when the victim believes that the perpetrator was acting on racial grounds and/or there is evidence of racism.

Qualitative and quantitative studies provide growing evidence of racism and the disadvantages suffered by racialized groups in Europe. In Britain and America since the 1990s there have been sporadic outbreaks of rioting involving issues of "race". In

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Germany immigrants and ethnic minorities have become the prominent target of bias-motivated violence (Bradley, 1995). Virtually all violent acts against immigrants in Germany are committed by male youthful offenders with poor educational and social backgrounds (Albrecht, 1995). The studies of Virtanen (1995, 1996) represented the first arrays of empirical results on racism on immigrants in Finland. As experienced by Black African, Latin-American, and Arabic respondents, violent attacks were linked with racist or hate motivations and were unevenly distributed among immigrants. However, the question of who becomes a target of racism is broad: it may be foreigners, citizens of the country, or even people not physically present (Baumgartl & Favell, 1995). Among the disadvantaged may be found ethnic minorities, asylum seekers, tourists, students, black people, businessmen and well-to-do sojourners.

Reports on specific institutions and localities have high-lighted the way racism operates in areas of social life, assuming many faces: physical action, social attitudes, or political and institutional forms. For example, the 1989 Gifford Inquiry into racial discrimination in Liverpool found that black people were confined to certain parts of the city and were targets of hostility if they moved outside them. As compared to native citizens, immigrants run a greater risk of being detained at the police station (Junger, 1988), and sentenced more severely (Timmerman et al., 1986). Similarly, it has been argued that there exists a general xenophobic attitude among the authorities whom persons, including immigrants, have to deal with in Finland (Ekholm, 1994).

According to Döös et. al. (1994), immigrants have a higher frequency of work-related accidents than native people which was explained as a process of disadvantage, where immigrants drift to such jobs where the risk of accidents is

considerably high. The first two years seem to be critical while after seven years no differences may be found. On the basis of the Finnish Accident Register, language difficulties and communication problems are the most common source of work accidents for immigrants. Other possible factors may be a lower level of vocational and safety education, and higher mobility in the labour market.

Finland has been ethnically highly homogenous with the lowest proportion of residents with foreign backgrounds among the total population in Western Europe, being 1.4% in 1995. The growth of immigration in the 1990s is largely due to the immigration of refugees, and ethnic Finns from the former Soviet Union and present Russia. About 4,000 refugees from Somalia and 3,000 refugees from the former Yugoslavia represent the first sizeable intercontinental migrants to Finland in the 1990s. Recently, student exchange has brought about 5,000 foreign students annually to Finland. Foreign students meet problems that may be connected to adaptation, language, home sickness, loneliness, and racism based on race and ethnic origin (Church, 1982).

Subjects and data collection

In the present study, the basic population consisted of immigrants in young adulthood living in Turku. The data was collected via interviews in summer 1994 and concerned ethnic and demographic background, reasons

Table I. Ethnic Characteristics of Sample (n = 62)

Ethnicity	n	%
South-European	15	24.3
South-American	12	19.4
Black African	16	25.6
Arabic	12	19.4
North European	7	11.3

for and experiences of racism, and coping strategies with racism. The diversity of the group is apparent, although the nonsystematic method of sampling resulted in a seeming oversampling of Southern European, South American, Black African and Arabic respondents and an undersampling of Northern European respondents (Table 1).

78% of the respondents were male, and 22% were female. They ranged in age from 18 to 32 years with the median age of 26 years. Most of respondents (60 %) were in open marriage situations, one fifth were married and one fifth divorced. For the most part, couples had one Finnish partner (93 %). Half of the respondents were unemployed, and one quarter of the respondents were employed. Of those who studied, six respondents were university students, two studied at vocational schools, and six in preparatory courses for immigrants. All of the respondents were foreign-born.

The Forms and Causes of Racism

The forms of racism were regarded as signifying disgust with other cultures, discrimination, verbal abuse and violence on the basis of skin colour which appears to be consistent with the definition of popular racism (Back 1996). Racism was talked about in the context of lived events and experiences, not in the context of relationships. Institutional forms of racism were bound with encounters in educational, occupational or leisure spaces or in the official system of justice. The account of an 18-year-old Brazilian girl is an example of popular racism: *I was in McDonalds and the skinheads were making fun of me and my friend - pointing, trying to speak in Spanish and just making fun, but I thought it was really mean.*

All of the respondents had strong opinions about causes for racism and believed that the

situation had worsened in the past few years. The respondents listed several factors which they perceived as more pronounced causes of racism: (1) the deteriorating economic situation in Finland, (2) refugee influx, (3) skinheads, (4) a media which writes negatively about refugees, (5) prejudices and jealousy of Finns, (6) passiveness of police, and (7) the history of Finland as an isolated country.

Racism was explained by the feelings of some Finns that they were victims of favoritism towards refugees and reverse discrimination in the housing market. The fears of the Finns, fueled by accusations such as *You enjoy, we pay for it* and *You take our money and girls* were the sources of negative responses among immigrants. Along this line of reasoning a 28-year-old Algerian man stated that *Finnish people are not racist inside, just jealous*. This form of hostility can be viewed as a guilt syndrome that is connected with chauvinism about well-being. Finns are fighting against immigrants for their well-being. One reason stated was that Finns had grown in close-knit, exclusively Finnish communities which distrusted strangers and feared immigrants. Consequently, Finns were accustomed to displaying a distrust of all outsiders. These attitudes of Finns were explained to have their roots in the history of wars and defense of Finland.

Some respondents parodied with the cultural unexperience of Finns as a reason for racism: *If you dress nicely, they think that you are a drug dealer or criminal. If you dress poorly, they in a way label you, see some kind of standard, they want to see that you are down and they are up. It is a kind of competition.* On the other hand, one respondent stated that immigrants could be chosen by a law, since many do not belong in Finland: *They marry, do not get a job, get social money and only go to the disco.*

Lacking cultural competence and small talk skills, Finnish men resort to hostile acts incited by the co-habitation of a Finnish

woman and a male immigrant. These acts were often fueled by the intake of alcoholic beverages by the Finns, while many respondents mentioned the importance of refraining from alcohol in order to avoid violence. A 26-year-old Spanish woman with a high level of education thought that different temperament was the most prevalent reason for racism: *Finnish people are quite closed, shy, they do not go anywhere. They are not friendly, they are polite, only polite. They do not like foreigners, they are careful.*

Extreme ideologies such as neo-nazism were seen as the main motive behind violence on the part of skinheads, fueled by concepts of race which depended on notions of biological or genetic superiority and the right to rule over "lower" races. Skinhead violence was explained by the social pressures exerted on the individual by his peer group and by his family while skinheads were described as generally lacking knowledge of the world. On one occasion, skinheads had produced controversy with their outrageous questions to the American Army visiting in the town: *You are niggers, why do you come here?* This behavior was considered "stupid" by the respondent, and afterwards the officials had to apologise to the Army.

Respondents with higher education elaborated the lack of public discussion on racism in their answers. One respondent stated that *the situation will not get any better unless everything goes to the media, only then does it get a response, not before.* In the autumn of 1995, there were, indeed, some events that led to a public discussion in the press (see Finnish League for Human Rights, 1996). First, the provincial city of Joensuu became nationally known as a place where racist youth mobs (skinheads) started an open war against the few black people in the city. Only after two African-American basketball players were forced to leave, was the issue of racist violence taken seriously. However, Somali refugees in the city were

threatened and attacked with knives for years before these incidents took place, mainly because of the envy of local youth that Somalis were able to buy new cars with their money from the government.

Racial Violence and Harassment

The experience of racial violence and harassment has not been well documented and here I want to consider race as a divisive social parameter for the shaping of racism towards immigrants. First, the forms of racism that men experience were mostly in the form of threats, obstruction, and jostling (Table 2). About one half of all male respondents had suffered some form of racial violence and harassment in the past year, and, thus, low level racial harassment can represent an equally serious form of the problem regardless of the sex of an immigrant. Furthermore, Africans and Arabs were hit with a visible sign of damage and Africans were jostled and received bruises or wounds. Students with higher education had usually experienced fewer or no attacks all.

Skinhead violence was mentioned as a source of fear which may be targeted randomly, thus, victimizing immigrants from all social and ethnic backgrounds. Skinhead violence, typically, took place in a group of young men in public places and was directed towards a victim who was alone or with his girlfriend. Respondents felt that these types of acts were very unfair. One respondent had experienced skinhead violence more as psychological violence in which the victim is totally humiliated and left in fear. Only in two cases was the instigator all alone.

One skinhead came to me insulting in the bus. He spit in my face and said to me: Leave my country. Nobody said anything in the bus to defend me.

Violent acts from the side of skinheads were fueled with threats and hate phrases, and some incidents of violent acts were

Table 2. Type of racial violence and harassment

Type of violence	Men (n = 49)		Women (n = 13)		Total (n = 62)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Threats	25	52	2	15	27	44
Preventing freedom of movement	20	41	2	15	22	36
Pushing	29	57	2	15	31	49
Beating						
- no physical marks	15	31	2	15	17	28
- bruises	8	17	1	8	9	15
- wound, contusion	8	17	0	0	8	14
Other violence	17	43	3	27	20	40

Each respondent may have experienced multiple types of violence and harassment, and the percents in each type relate to the total number of the respondents.

described as very brutal. In some cases skinhead violence occurred in a series of related attacks which appears to be consistent with conventional definitions of social terrorism, denoting an attempt to create fear and terror among a special population (Gurr, 1989). One respondent reported that he had fought with skinheads many times, and after that he was left in peace. The interviews showed that these mobs worked in an organized manner, chasing victims, but most incidences of violent attacks on the part of skinheads were random violence where the targets were chosen by the mere opportunity. Although all skinheads do not support violent and racist models of behaviour, the experiences of the respondents showed that violence become crueler as a group process.

Institutional Racism

In the following analysis my concern is to report the contexts and the social locations in which immigrants in Finland may experience racism. Some forms of institutional racism have been described earlier (Virtanen, 1993). In the reports of the respondents the importance of contextual influences on racial inequality was particularly salient in encounters with the police. One typical example was a Nicaraguan man who had lived in Finland for six years and studied at

the university. While 15 to 20 youngsters attacked him, the police registered three instigators of violence, and treated the respondent like a criminal, took finger prints, and put into the register as if he had killed somebody. He concluded that the police always side with the Finns whatever they do.

The identification of institutional racism was expressed in the extracts from a 27-year-old Brazilian man who had lived in Finland since childhood. He reported that he had been the public scapegoat at school since everybody knew his background. Later on, his peers accepted him, but the process was painful: *They teased me about my mother, shouted señora and other stupid things. But then in some phase the guys accepted me and I become just to say a respected member of the class.*

In the army the respondent was left in peace until his background became public. The situation was very annoying, and the respondent was told on every occasion that he was not Finnish: *Everybody spoke in a terribly racist way, they pushed and teased me all the time.* Thus, the process of acceptance did not take place in an organisation where possible anti-racist elements may be minimal. In the words of a Turkish man, the activities of the border officials were typified as being a common source of racism: *I wanted to go on a*

one-day trip to Stockholm with my wife, but the officials said I did not have a passport. I have been in Stockholm already two times with this paper that is like a passport. I think this is not a bureaucratic problem, but a problem of racism.

The experiences of a 30-year-old Gambian man resembled social terror, since the perpetrators were the same people and violent attacks occurred at the home of the respondent. In the context of the farming school, the respondent was exposed to ignorance on the part of his teachers: *They do not want to teach me right.* This distrust had escalated to the police and the lawyers in town who *only backed each other to put the foreigner in trouble.*

The doors of restaurants and discos may be further sites for discrimination, especially for Africans and Arabs. In one case a doorman pushed the respondent and his friends. In another case a doorman did not let a Turkish respondent into a disco where his wife was waiting for him. The police did not do anything in that case. A Nigerian man had been refused admittance to a restaurant, and his attitude was somewhat bitter if not negative: *I do not let it disturb me. There are a lot of pubs around, they cannot stop me everywhere.* Disturbances in restaurants are generalized to all foreigners as one respondent explains: *Three men attacked me in the restaurant. I tried to protect myself. This is because in most restaurants they say: Oh, it's a foreigner who made trouble.*

The most common reason for not reporting violent incidents to the police was a lack of confidence in the police. Black Africans and Arabs, in particular, felt that exposure of violent attacks to the scrutiny of police was lacking in effectiveness. In a violent act a 29-year-old African working in an ethnic cafe was kicked by an under-aged skinhead. The police did not make any investigation of the perpetrator. An African girl who was kicked into a state of unconsciousness was taken

into police custody, while the instigator, a karate kid, was released. As she explained, the police-officers wrongly interpreted her self-defending behavior, and thus victimized the respondent. The issue of the role of confidence in the police as a mediating factor in the reporting of victimization is important because it has the potential to offer an opportunity for intervention. Thus, intervention programmes are needed to determine effective methods by which confidence in the police might be improved.

Four respondents found the court's decision to disregard racist overtones in their cases questionable, which may be an indication of underlying differences in viewpoints in regards to crimes which can be connected to racist motives. On the other hand, sentences may be handed down solely on the basis of the explanations of the Finns who, thus, transferred the responsibility onto immigrants. A 25-year-old Yugoslavian man was fined, since the court had relied on the claims of the Finns that he had been the aggressor. A 22-year-old Somalian woman was fined, because she had hit one of her harassers with a bottle in the disco.

In the place of work communication problems were most prevalent in the remarks of respondents. A 26-year-old Nigerian man had lived in Finland since the end of 1980s. He had worked at a cleaning firm, and learned basic Finnish. He was considerably bitter because he felt that his skin colour may prevent his promotion despite his competence. The respondent attended a part-time job where the introduction for the work had been appropriate, and his relations with other workers were good. However, the respondent had fallen a victim of an accident already on the second day at work which resulted in a sick leave of four days. The accident took place when the respondent tried to lift a bridge that was out of order. According to the respondent, the accident was caused by language difficulties since a

worker who had noticed the damage was not able to explain it to the respondent.

The remarks of the respondents strengthened the picture that Finland is no exception to the trend of racism aimed at ethnic minorities and immigrants throughout Europe (Baumgartl & Favell 1995). The present study sought to explore the nature of the various constituent parts of racial violence and harassment, with particular attention being paid to the wide range of incidents that constitute "low level" racial harassment. According to Virdee (1995), the importance of the low level form of harassment should not be understated, since they create a continued climate of insecurity amongst the victims. Furthermore, the accounts included here show the importance of dividing our understanding of racism into institutional and popular variants. It is in the institutional contexts of the system of justice, army, and school that racist practices may be most prevalent. The forms of racism at work may be more covert, but become visible when immigrants are deprived of safe working environments, for example. Popular racism, on the other hand, was viewed as unevenly directed against immigrants. According to Back (1996), the awareness of this division is very important when considering how to locate the understanding of racism both spatially and institutionally.

The possibility of becoming victimized increased considerably with the lower level of schooling and with the longer stay in Finland concerning Black Africans and Arabs, in particular. While positive outcomes were more evident in educational and work places, some organisations such as the army or the system of justice were less reversible in their effects. Thus, racism may not be regarded as a matter of personal failure on the part of the respondents, but as something originating from the characteristics of the organisations, attributing discrimination and racism to the structure of society.

Coping with Racism

Immigrants are not passive recipients of racist discourses and in the context of daily interactions they work on representations of race, parody racism and develop a critique of the racial structuring of society and different strategies to cope with racism. Coping strategies dealt with the mastery of one's own fear, or with minimizing the risk of violence by avoiding certain bars, restaurants and discos, for example. Some respondents experienced that every place may be dangerous in company with foreign friends. Most respondents talk about their style of avoiding violence which occurred in everyday life: *Seven to eight skinheads attacked me with a knife in cafe, I ran away.*

Most respondents generally were rather pessimistic about the supportive potential available in their environment or practical solutions for reducing racism. While university students were more inclined to focus on studies and spend less time out on the weekends: ... *because I never interrupt with them, I just do my things.* Those who were unemployed were more experienced in avoiding difficulties: *I am not stupid, I am not young, I must behave.* The positive sides of different ethnicity may also function as a way of coping. A 29-year-old Brazilian man regarded his origin as a positive thing: *I am from Brazil, they like me.* A Mauritanian man was satisfied with his appearance and skin colour: *It is just different from the others, totally different. The girls, women like it, they love it.*

The other side of the coin is that popular movements against racism are taking their first steps in Finland. While expressing the idea that race or skin colour should not make any difference as to how people treat each other, the respondents talked about the hostility that has been generalized towards all immigrants while anti-racist voices have remained silent. One African man who had

experienced many attacks on the part of skinheads felt that immigrants have to stick together with anti-racist people like brothers and sisters. On the other hand, the trust of the respondents in the power of politicians to improve the situation was markedly low. The

results underline the need of considering the importance of general consciousness behind anti-racist activities as a collective form of coping with the evils of racism and in the will to display tolerance.

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