CASEWORKER ARTICLE

Empowerment, racist incidents and casework practice

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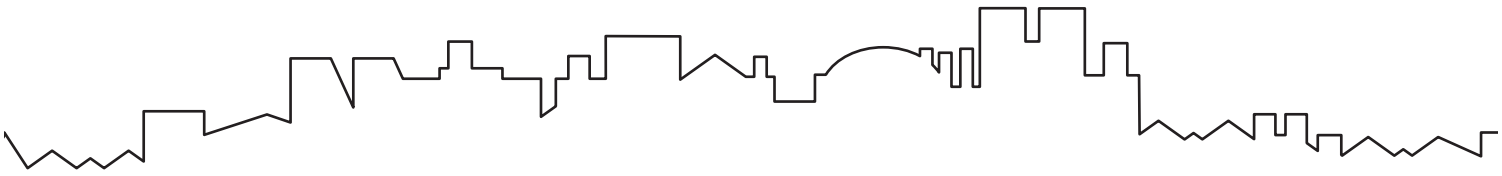
Abstract

Empowerment is a key value when working with clients subject to racist incidents in housing services. Casework practice is the process whereby, for example, housing officers, anti-social behaviour officers and neighbourhood wardens work with a tenant who has reported a racist incident to help resolve the complaint. This article focuses on the need for racist/hate incident caseworkers to be aware of the value of empowerment, and to be able to offer an empowering service when working directly with clients. The article argues that victims of racist incidents value a dedicated and non-judgemental casework service that offers them some pathway to help, assistance and a secure sense of self and place. The caseworker is able to facilitate all this by the service they offer to their clients by recognising and responding to the values of empowerment, advocacy and a victim-centred service.

Introduction

Casework practice is the process whereby, for example, housing officers, anti-social behaviour officers and neighbourhood wardens work with a tenant who has reported a racist incident to help resolve the complaint. Victims of racist incidents have indicated that they value a dedicated service tailored to their needs that includes receiving a non-judgemental service, emotional support, promoting their rights and validation of their experience (Chahal, 2003). These are the foundational skills of casework and helping in public services, underpinned by a continuously developing evidence base and often supported by professional training, that all housing staff who are directly working with and supporting clients need to be aware of and able to perform.

There is an assumption that racist harassment casework in housing is something that requires 'common sense' and, at best, working knowledge of the law, relevant agencies and cultural sensitivity. However, in other areas of casework practice there is recognition of the importance of underlying values and their implications for practice. The social work profession, for example, is based on a fundamental set of common values that have led to the formulation of principles of practice, such as respect for the intrinsic worth and dignity of the individual,



which implies the need for a non-judgemental attitude and self-awareness in the practitioner (Dhooper & Moore, 2000).

Further, in instituting a casework response in partnership with a client, there are a number of fundamental issues that need to be recognised by the caseworker and the service offering help.

First, the levels of non-reporting of racist incidents remain high, and therefore to encourage reporting a client seeking help should be offered a suitable and appropriate response. Second, in making an official report to a service, the complainant is by definition asking for help and wanting a response from a service provider or providers. Third, the incident that is being reported is unlikely to be the first incident but possibly part of a series of previous incidents, and a concern that there will be incidents in the future (Chahal & Julienne, 1999). Finally, a complaint is being made because the client fears an escalation of violence that they perceive they cannot manage or cope with.

In the above context, the worker has to be aware of how racism manifests itself, how racist harassment threatens the security and well-being of a person, family and the community, and how to offer a non-judgemental response to the client, taking into account that most cases of reported racist incidents will not result in any legal sanction against the perpetrator. Thus the interaction between the worker and the client is a crucial relationship that offers a victim of racist incidents a route back to a secure sense of self and place through an empowering relationship. However, often this can be undermined by the process of secondary victimisation.

Secondary victimisation

Chahal and Julienne (1999) reported that many victims talked about being ignored, unheard and unprotected when reporting racist incidents. While there is evidence that improvements have been made in the development of reporting of racist incidents, there is little evidence to suggest that casework practice has become more robust or become more sustainable and follows agreed standards of practice (Docking & Tuffin, 2005; Lemos & Crane, 2000; Chahal, 2008). Service providers and caseworkers need to be aware of, and have the ability to reduce and respond to, secondary victimisation. Secondary victimisation is:

> *inconsiderate treatment by the authorities…*[which] *has the potential to produce feelings of alienation and isolation. Institutional racism, which may be reflected in procedures, attitudes and behaviours, will cause victims to feel isolated and prevent them receiving protection or achieving justice* (Victim Support, 2001).

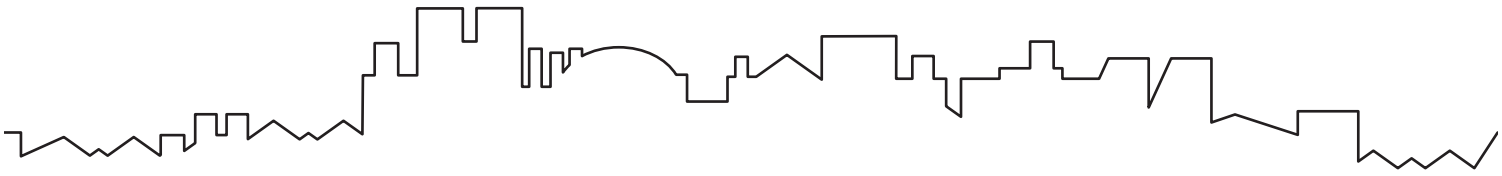
In 2007 Support Against Racist Incidents, a casework-led service based in Bristol, commented:

> *The other sort of racism that we are seeing is carried out by agencies against the very people who are suffering racial violence… We still see police officers questioning why someone has reported something as racist. A lot of officers don't seem to have got the idea that we've now shifted to the Lawrence Inquiry definition of a racist incident* (IRR, 2007).

Similarly, the Newham Monitoring Project (NMP, 2007) noted that feedback from cases they had dealt with indicated that:

- the majority of clients found that their cases or complaints were not taken seriously and were frequently dismissed or ignored
- organisations tended to be orientated towards achieving quick resolutions and did not push for high standards of accountability from relevant statutory bodies.

Secondary victimisation is likely to reduce the confidence of victims, increase anxiety and heighten suspicion about agencies. To reduce or eliminate secondary victimisation, an agency/caseworker has to ensure that they follow their policy and procedures, believe the victim, liaise with and signpost to other agencies and be trained fully to understand and respond to the victim's perspective. They should receive effective training and supervision and be reflective in their practice, to embed the learning in future casework and service development and crucially, not operate from preconceived views. To achieve this,



the worker and service provider have to recognise and respond to the 'victim's perspective'.

The victim's perspective

The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry recommended that a racist incident should be defined in a way which did not rely on a police officer's interpretation of the offence. The Inquiry offered a new definition which has been widely adopted and adapted more recently in relation to hate incidents.

> *A racist incident is any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person.* (Macpherson, 1999)

Following the Macpherson definition of a racist incident, an understanding of the victim's perspective means that one starts with the premise of believing the person who has experienced it. The worker who has first contact with a victim or a witness of a racist incident should respond in a sensitive manner that shows understanding of how victims feel and have knowledge of what they may have experienced.

Caseworkers need to be aware that the client may have tried to respond to the problem through their own informal networks before formally reporting or approaching an agency for assistance. Informal coping strategies arise in response to problems. Informal coping strategies include ignoring and avoiding the perpetrator, changing one's routine, not going out at night or certain times of the day, telling friends, family and a GP, building deterrents around the home, for example a fence, not letting children play outside, or challenging the perpetrator (Chahal & Julienne, 1999). It is only when these informal strategies fail to prevent or stop the racist incidents, or the victim can no longer cope or respond to the current situation, that they are likely to make a formal complaint to, for example, housing services. The worker may have to take on different roles with the client through the complaint process, for example from initially offering emotional and practical support and possibly advocacy, to later ensuring that the client has the knowledge and resources to access other forms of support and self-help. The worker would need to recognise the coping strategies adopted by victims, and ensure that throughout the process they continue to work **with** the client and not always **for** the client.

A key aim of all racist incident casework is to empower clients through assistance, advice and support. Chahal (2003) found that the victim's perspective involved at least the following attributes.

Non-judgemental approach

Clients want to be assured of an empathic and non-judgemental hearing of their experiences.

Focus of a dedicated agency

Clients want a single agency or individual to support them and to have continuity of contact with an individual.

Promoting rights

Offer clients information about what to do, what questions to ask when dealing with other agencies and what their legal rights are.

Signposting

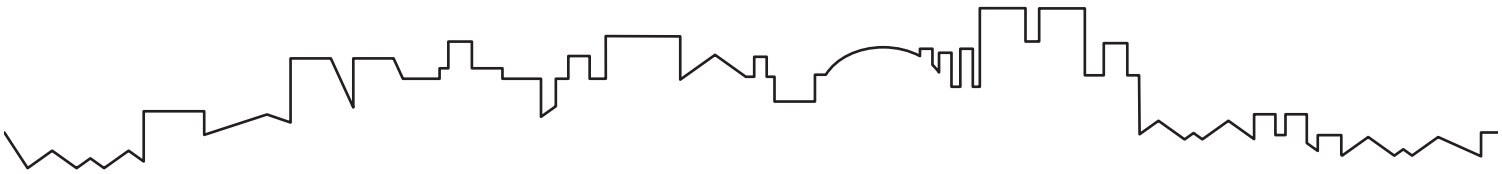
Signposting a client to relevant agencies empowers them to make informed decisions about where they want to take their complaint.

Emotional support

Offering immediate and on-going emotional support is crucial to helping clients feel comfortable and listened to. Caseworkers will have both to manage and to respond to the emotional fall-out of racist harassment and be able to offer support that indicates that they understand and are willing to listen.

Advocacy

Being an advocate on behalf of a client may occur in the early stages of a complaint, or on an on-going basis for more vulnerable victims. Advocating on behalf of a client means that the caseworker begins to share the burden of the client's experience and can start to develop methods for empowering them by developing a plan of action that is clearly communicated and agreed with the client as the relationship develops.



Accessibility
An inaccessible service or worker is unlikely to be able to offer a client- based service. Being accessible offers a level of reassurance that the client's case is being progressed and that support is on hand if needed.

After-care
Closing a case with the client's permission and making some contact after a time gap offer clients reassurance that there is still support available if needed.

Validation
Caseworkers are not always able to stop the racist harassment. However, the expectation from a client is often that they are believed, that their experiences are validated by being listened to and being heard.

All the above are valued attributes for a casework service, and highlight that interpersonal skills are crucial to offering an effective and empowering service. Clients with interpersonal problems gave high satisfaction ratings if they:
- had relief from unburdening (including experiencing the worker's approach as unhurried)
- received emotional support (including listening and expending energy)
- felt enlightenment (greater self-awareness, and improved understanding of their own situation)
- received guidance (suggestions, advice and recommendations).

Dissatisfaction resulted where:
- clients and workers differed in perspective, attitude to problem solving and understanding of the causes of problems
- these differences were not recognised, acknowledged or explained
- the client felt the worker doubted their story, wasn't interested in them or lacked authority to act (Koprowska, 2005).

Racist incident casework

Delivering an agreed action plan with a client is a key function of casework practice. Racist incident casework is a multi-tasked and multi-skilled intervention. It involves working with victims, undertaking administrative duties (including co-ordinating multi-agency responses) in relation to processing a complaint, and actively engaging with relevant agencies to find a successful resolution to the reported problem (Chahal, 2003).

Racist incident casework has been defined as:

> *An interaction which makes clients aware of their rights, enabling them to take back control of their lives and offering realistic expectations of the outcome of their complaint* (Chahal, 2003).

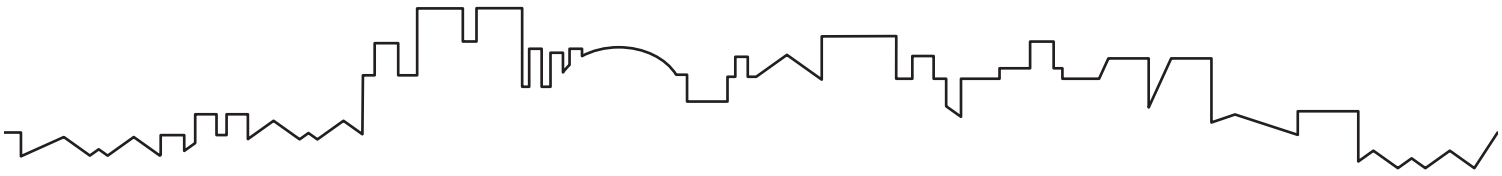
The Commission for Racial Equality has described the role of a caseworker as follows.

> *Acting on behalf of the client, the role of the caseworker in racial harassment cases is to ensure that all individuals and agencies with the power to assist the client act swiftly and efficiently to bring the harassment to an end.* (CRE, 2000)

Five key tasks have been identified as crucial to effective casework:
- offering help
- reducing the immediate impact of the harassment
- aiming to resolve the complaint through an agreed intervention or series of interventions
- developing professional practice
- empowerment.

Principles of casework practice
Casework can never be about applying pre-determined solutions. It requires a creative, collaborative, problem-solving approach to helping (Smale *et al*, 2000). Casework should focus not on the power of the worker to solve problems, but on a joint and evolving relationship with the client. The focus of casework and the caseworker is on developing the capacity of the individual and their networks to look for solutions, rather than on any lack of capacity or on looking for someone or something to blame.

The principles of solution-focused casework focus on change and possibilities, creating goals and preferred futures, building on strengths, skill and resources, looking for 'what's right', not just



'what's wrong', being respectfully curious, creating co-operation and collaboration, and using humour and creativity (Sharry, 2001).

Caseworkers should work from the perspective that there are many viable (but as yet unknown) options which 'can be discovered or even created in the course of the action'. This means that caseworkers need to be able to work with uncertainty, to risk making mistakes, and to correct them and learn from them, 'continually feeling our way ahead' (Smale *et al*, 2000).

Empowering the client

Reese (1991) defines the objective of empowerment as social justice:

> *giving people greater security and political and social equality, through mutual support and shared learning building up small steps towards wider goals* (p 268)

Empowerment, therefore, has a particular significance in work with minority communities who may have been negatively valued for generations, so that 'their powerlessness is extensive and crippling'. People who have been powerless during their lives may 'carry a sizeable burden of learned helplessness', that is, they have formed an expectation that their actions will not produce useful results (Payne, 1997 p284). Payne sees empowerment in casework as based on the assumption that:

> *workers lend their power to the client for a period to assist them to take power permanently through helping them attain control over their lives* (Payne, 1997 p275).

The aims of empowerment are to help the client grasp their own agency in finding a solution (this is not the same as being to blame for the problem), and to see the caseworker as a potential peer-partner in the process of reaching a solution, who has access to resources of skills and knowledge which the client can use. The worker needs to see the power structure (for example, courts, schools, housing providers, police) as, to some extent, open to influence (Payne, 1997).

The implications of the empowerment approach for practice are:

- work to overcome clients' responses which stem from negative valuation, so they see themselves as being able to affect their problem
- identify and remove blocks to problem-solving
- identify and reinforce supports to promote effective problem-solving
- contextualisation, where the worker focuses on the client's understanding of her social situation, not on assumptions or organisational policies
- identifying all the possibilities which may meet need, and helping the client come to decisions about her own life
- collectivity, where the worker is concerned to reduce isolation by collectivising (rather than personalising) experience, and connecting her into networks and relationships (Payne, 1997 p278).

Adopting a strategy of empowerment requires a commitment to maintaining and improving 'effective equal services' and:

> ***also*** *to confrontation of pervasive negative valuations* (Payne, 1997).

In other words, both agencies and individuals have to be aware of their own practice and how it may influence outcomes, how services may exclude disempowered communities or indeed how institutional racism may affect provision of services.

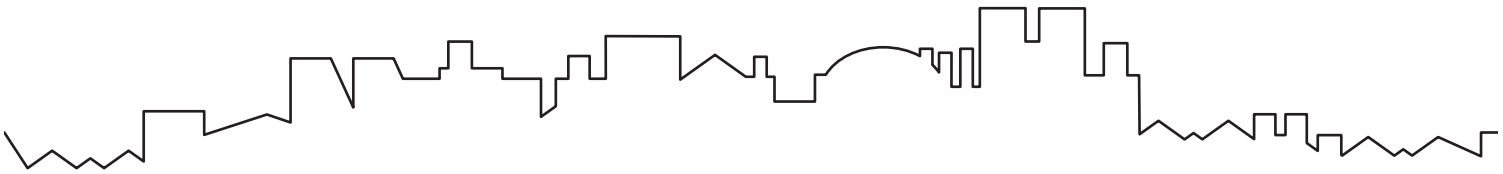
It is crucial in racist incidents casework that empowerment, as an activity and aspiration, is linked to clear advocacy practices and ensures that clients have an understanding of their rights to counteract the consequences of discrimination and disadvantage.

Advocacy

Advocacy is the practice of representing, under instruction from the client:

> *the interests of powerless clients to powerful individuals and social structures.*

It can be used by a worker on behalf of their client both within their own organisation and with other agencies:



> *to argue for resources, or change the interpretation which powerful groups make of clients* (Payne, 1997).

The caseworker may use their power and influence in the interest of the real, expressed wishes of the client. Caseworkers frequently undertake advocacy activities for clients to ensure that other agencies meet their responsibilities. There are at least six principles for advocacy (Seden, 2000):

- act in the client's best interest
- act in accordance with the client's wishes and instructions
- keep the client properly informed
- carry out instructions with diligence and competence
- act impartially and offer frank, independent advice
- maintain the rule of confidentiality.

To be a successful advocate, the practitioner will need to listen carefully, be skilled in using questions, be able to respond accurately and clearly, and be aware of the non- verbal aspects of communication.

Working with other agencies

Seden (2000) highlights that the role of the caseworker is, in part, to work with others to manage social problems:

> *taking a marginal problem-solving position rather than sliding into becoming a permanent part of the problem and its management...* [Practitioners] *contribute the essential third-party perspective common to all forms of conciliation, conflict mediation and negotiation,*

through processes of exchanging information. The key to successful casework practice is that action is determined and undertaken by all those involved in the problem (including the complainant). In this respect the caseworker is an active but not overbearing partner, working with and for the complainant, and is able to ensure that the casework response evolves as the complaint is responded to.

Caseworkers will often have to work extensively with other agencies and individuals. All these people must be enabled to feel:

> *a sufficient sense of shared power with respect to the task,*

in order to maximise the benefits of creativity, extra resources, information and diversity (Seden, 2000).

Caseworkers will need to facilitate clients' capacity for expression so that they are better able to propose and take action. Caseworkers should be willing to be influenced by and learn from clients' experiential and intuitive knowledge about how the problem should be approached or solved (Seden, 2000).

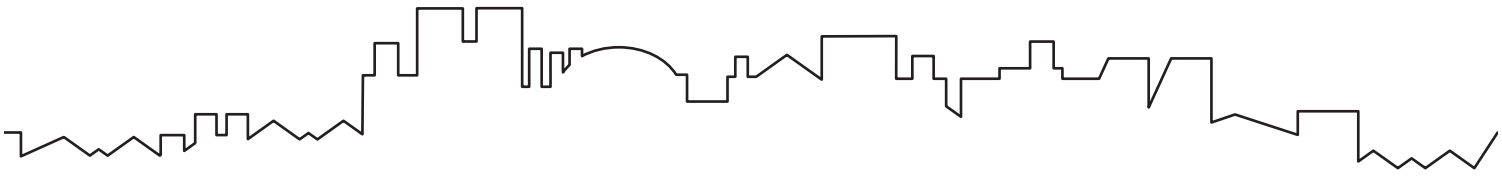
In practice

The following example comes from the London Borough of Bromley Racial Equality Council.

'My client was an existing client. She came to us in 2005 again with the same problem as it had not been resolved. She came to the office and had a one-to-one interview, in which case details were taken and an action plan made. I also asked the client to sign the client consent and authorisation form before I could act on her behalf.

'My client had been experiencing racial harassment from her neighbours for some time. She is a tenant of a local housing association and asked for their assistance in the matter. After their investigations, my client was still unhappy with their response. My client also went to the Police but again was unhappy with their investigations. This is when she came to us as she said no one was listening to her.

'In my action plan, my first approach was to contact the Police and they said they were not treating the issue as a racial matter but as criminal damage. I was not impressed with their professional conduct. They also said that more evidence had needed to be gathered and were unhelpful in assisting my client in gathering this evidence. However I continued to liaise with them and informed them of every incident that occurred to my client. I told my client about the anti-social behaviour unit at the Council and I contacted them and explained to them that the Police were unhelpful. They installed a CCTV camera and they



monitored the situation. They worked and updated me on the situation regularly.

'I also liaised and arranged a meeting for my client and with one of the senior directors of the housing association. We put her case forward and provided them with all the evidence they needed. Her name went on the priority list to be re-housed. I also advised my client to give personal representation at the regular resident association meetings.

'Had my project not been available my client would gave continued to suffer harassment by her perpetrators. She would have continued to face barriers from the main statutory bodies whose duty is to promote race equality and avoiding race discrimination before it occurs.

'My clients often tell me that the valuable aspects of the service are that it is impartial, it is there to monitor the duties of the statutory bodies and to act as a mediator. But most of all they say that they value the human and emotional support I give them during these times of great trauma and need.

'The client wrote: "You are a real asset to BREC and I have found you to be very knowledgeable with the advice you have given me and your support was greatly appreciated. You are always so happy to help and I find that very refreshing... I really do not know what I would have done without you".' (Bromley Racial Equality Council, 2008)

Conclusion

Offering a timely and professional service for clients who have reported a racist incident will in some instances require the involvement of a variety of agencies, often co-ordinated by a housing worker. There are few specialist racist incident caseworkers and services that a housing worker can refer victims to (Chahal, 2003). It is therefore imperative that the housing worker understand how to respond to the needs of a tenant reporting a racist incident. In responding to the complaint, the worker will need to be aware of the pathway for the tenant to make a formal report. They also need to understand the implications of offering a victim-centred service and have the necessary interpersonal skills. These include being able to offer a service that both empowers and is able adequately to respond to the twin needs of a client and the housing service involved to resolve a reported racist incident case effectively. This article has aimed to show the range of skills a worker needs to offer a service that is empowering, the importance of recognising and responding to the victim's perspective, and understanding the pathway to reporting and the process of secondary victimisation. A housing worker with knowledge of all these aspects is likely to offer a relevant and important service that the victim of racist incidents will value.

Note

This article is based on a manual written for caseworkers (available from kusminder@sky.com) in both public and voluntary services, developed by the author and funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government, Comic Relief and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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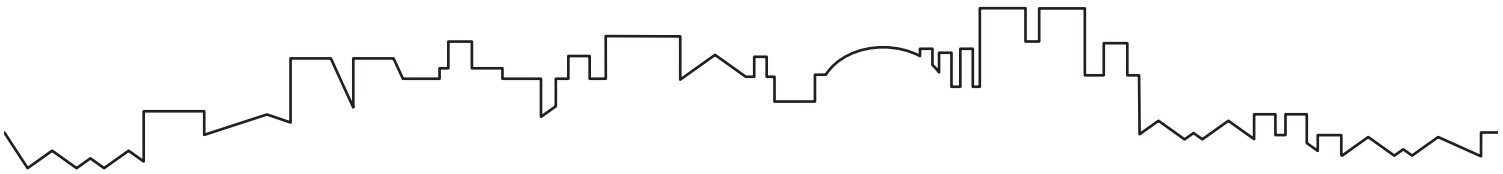

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