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978-0-521-33824-0 - White Talk, Black Talk: Inter-racial Friendship and Communication
amongst Adolescents

Roger Hewitt

Excerpt

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Introduction

Unlike the United States, Great Britain has only comparatively recently come to have a native-born black population of any numerical significance (Fryer 1984). Over half of all black British people whose parents were born in the Caribbean are at present under the age of twenty, and the vast majority of these were born in Great Britain. This, together with the growth in the number of British children of South Asian parentage, has provided white British children, especially in English cities, with the possibility of an experience of inter-racial contact quite different from that afforded to previous generations. The impact of that experience has taken a number of social and cultural forms, and is itself mediated by other important influences. Hence the urban white adolescent responses, and those of black adolescents which are the subject of this book, do not easily yield simple answers to questions posed in terms of 'attitudinal change'.

The impact of inter-racial friendships on *black* British youngsters is, of course, of special importance in that it has a potential relevance to the way in which racism is or is not experienced in close association with white peers. Of importance here too are not only the *social* terms within which adolescent inter-racial contacts operate but also the *cultural*. Black youth culture in Britain has, since the 1960s, become increasingly well defined. This has had a significant part to play in determining the nature and terms of black/white adolescent contact, for it is often through the more oblique means of cultural affinities and oppositions that adolescents come to live out and enact what remains unarticulated in more conscious ways.

This area of cultural relations is the principle theme of this book, and, within that area, the role played by language in registering, influencing and providing a medium through which relationships are acted out. In the context of adolescent race relations, the use of Caribbean-based

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creole speech by young blacks and the acquisition and use of those same forms by *whites* are examined from a perspective which draws on sociology and that anthropological part of sociolinguistics which has gone under the name of the 'ethnography of speaking'. It deals with communicative practices between adolescents in specific urban settings, and its starting point is the actual friendships between young British blacks of Afro-Caribbean parentage and white working-class adolescents in two areas of South London. It is based on research conducted between 1980 and 1983 which used qualitative, ethnographic techniques involving extended serial interviewing, participant observation, and the tape-recording of spontaneous speech in natural settings.

At the outset it is necessary to stand back a little from a tangentially related set of issues surrounding what has been called the 'contact hypothesis' – a hypothesis which broadly posits that an increase of contact between racial groups reduces 'prejudice'. This hypothesis has been 'tested' in the United States from the 1940s onwards with mixed results (Allport 1954; Wilner *et al.* 1955). The same mixture of findings has also been true of British studies (Butler and Stokes 1974; Studlar 1977; Husbands 1979). There have also been difficulties with the hypothesis at the theoretical level, for it is an issue which has awkwardly straddled sociology and social psychology and its exact terms of reference are variously defined. Furthermore, the effects of 'contact' are far less frequently considered for the nature of their impact on the black minority, which is treated more often as the constant and impassive stimulus to white responses. The majority of studies under this rubric are, therefore, generally lacking in theoretical or empirical concern for the interactive dimension and qualities of 'contact'.

Within the clearly sociological version of the hypothesis, two kinds of finding have been most common in British studies, and both appeared in the reports of early research carried out within the Colour and Citizenship Survey (Deakin 1970). The first, as set out by Deakin, resulted from a comparison of 'a representative sample of the whole white population with a more limited group who were more likely to have experienced day-to-day contact with coloured people'. This indicated that, 'over a series of key questions . . . no significant difference was found between the views of the two groups' (Deakin 1970: 318; see also, Husbands 1979: 156). The other finding, which resulted from an examination of 'degrees of contact' within racially mixed inner city areas, was that 'those who said that they have become more favourably disposed towards coloured people tended also to be those who had spoken to and got on well with them' (Deakin 1970: 328). This second type of finding led writers such as Bagley (1969) to see in contact itself a 'hopeful' sign for race relations,

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and it is one that is also reflected in even the more impressionistic accounts of official and policy-related bodies. Thus the Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration (1977) reported:

The committee are encouraged by their impression that within the neighbourhood where West Indians are concentrated there is now much less evidence of racial prejudice than there was a few years ago. (xxxix)

This relation between official perspectives and such findings as have been made in relation to the 'contact hypothesis' has been examined by Henriques (1984) who has argued that its negative formulation – i.e. that unfamiliarity creates 'racial prejudice' – has, through such books as Patterson's *Dark Strangers* (1963), been absorbed into British official policy dealing with race, and that during an important period following the early 1960s a *laissez-faire* approach became apparent which 'paralysed' initiatives that might have addressed more effectively the question of racism.

The research reported on in *this* book, while having inter-racial friendship as its starting point, attempted to go far below the surface of the kinds of answers put forward by studies based on the 'contact hypothesis'. In contrast, it initially examined the kinds of influence which friendship *patterns* (rather than individual friendships) have on the flow of racist ideas and practices within socially located adolescent groups. Racism is not, therefore, treated here simply as a quality of individual personal relations, but as an attribute of societies and cultures which may be manifested in particular instances. Although produced and reproduced in various economic and institutional locations, it is examined here through its appearance in specific local adolescent social networks as it is registered in the social life of signs exchanged and manipulated within a particular cultural terrain.

Another group of studies which appears to be close to the present research is specifically concerned with inter-racial contact between children and adolescents. Here, again, the United States has inevitably a somewhat longer history of academic interest than has Great Britain (Carter *et al.* 1980). These studies are predominantly concerned with the effect of racial contact and mixing on white pupils, with the effect on black pupils being treated as a consequence of the moderation or otherwise of white 'racial attitudes'. Insights into black views of contact, such as occurs almost in passing in Cayton and Drake's famous study of Chicago, *Black Metropolis* (1946: 123) are rare in the literature, which for the most part displays a 'progressive liberal' viewpoint and involves a psychological or social psychological research framework. The desegre-

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gation of schools has especially been a stimulus to North American studies (Rist 1978; Gerard and Miller 1975; McConahay 1978; Schofield 1978) and studies of 'ethnic preferences' in young children, through sociometric studies and experiments involving photographs and dolls, have also been conducted (Koslin *et al.* 1969; Porter 1971) following the work of Clark and Clark (1947).

In Great Britain, the same predominance of studies from psychology and social psychology has been evident in the area of 'ethnic choice' and young people (Kawwa 1963; Durojaiye 1970; Puskin 1967; Bagley and Verma 1975; Braha and Rutter 1980; Milner 1983; Davey 1983). With increasingly sophisticated measurement techniques, social psychologists have repeatedly proved beyond a shadow of doubt – if such a shadow existed – that children tend to choose their own racial kind as friends far more than they choose members of other racial groups. Much of this work has looked at primary school children, although some work on secondary school children has also been conducted. Most studies have not involved the actual observation of behaviour, a fact which some authors lament (Milner 1983: 124) while others apparently applaud on the grounds that, 'one cannot know by observation how children would like to associate' (Davey 1983: 132).

Although social psychologists attempt to deal with what they see as human *group* relations and group identification in 'inter-group behaviour', methodologically there is a considerable gulf between the aims on the one hand of sociology/anthropology and on the other hand of the social psychologist, for whom an interest in measurement and experiment heavily outweighs an attention to explanation and theory. Disciplinary differences, therefore, are responsible for the gap between many of the works cited above and the present study, which is not concerned with measures but with mechanisms, and with 'friendships', 'social groups', 'race' and 'ideologies' as they are located in everyday life.

Despite the early recognition of the fact of children's racial mixing in British cities (Hiro 1971: 236), it is a curious fact that no *sociological* studies were undertaken of this specific area. Even as late as 1979, Rex and Tomlinson could request: 'We would like to see a study undertaken of white youth from immigrant majority schools, and white youth on the margins of immigrant areas' (Rex and Tomlinson 1979: 239); yet even now, at the time of writing, no such study has been undertaken, and the present work only obliquely answers the suggestion. Certainly the issue of adolescent racism has been addressed, in passing, by several of the studies appearing in recent years concerned with the sociology of youth and youth culture (Daniel and McGuire 1972; Mungham and Pearson 1976; Cohen and Robins 1978); but it is only occasionally (Pearson 1976)

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that the sociology of youth has directly addressed itself to this matter. The same is also true of those studies conducted by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University (Willis 1977; Hall and Jefferson 1976). While some of this influential centre's work on youth has included allusions to the racism of white adolescent boys, little attempt was made to subject it to any sustained ethnographic or theoretical attention.

The prominent exception at Birmingham to this lack of interest in black/white adolescent relationships was Hebdige (1976; 1979) whose research, although not primarily concerned with patterns of adolescent racism, into black and white youth cultures led him to build significantly on hints in Cohen (1972), and to construct a speculative but suggestive account of the impact of black cultures on white youth in the 1960s and 1970s. His interest in the semiotics of style and his emphasis on black music and speech in relation to whites indicated an area hardly attended to elsewhere (see also Chambers 1976; Root and Austin 1978). Hebdige's approach was partly influenced by French structuralism; and it is in relation to this, with the more clearly *anthropological* approaches of ethnography, the semiotics of culture (Geertz 1973) and anthropological linguistics, that a methodological ground, if not a specific area of interest, can be found which accords with the interests which underlie the present study.

It was from within this anthropological tradition that David Parkin addressed the question of language and its relationship to ethnicity and adolescent gangs in Nairobi (Parkin 1977), drawing urban anthropology, multi-lingualism, and the sociolinguistic work of William Labov on pre-adolescent gangs in New York into the theoretical debate over cultural categories and social order. A similar nexus of interests, although without specific concern with adolescents, has also marked the work of American anthropologist John Gumperz, who has consistently addressed the question of 'inter-ethnic' relations from the standpoint of linguistic anthropology, and has also conducted such studies on British soil (Gumperz 1978; 1982). Gumperz' work and the theoretical landscaping performed so effectively by Hymes (1962; 1971), together with the sociolinguistic research into 'black language' conducted by Mitchell-Kernan (1971), Labov (1972), Wolfram (1974), Heath (1984) and others, built upon a tradition which is, however, almost restricted to North American researchers.

This kind of approach has no sustained parallel in Great Britain, despite the useful incorporation of social network theory into sociolinguistic analysis by Milroy (1980) and the concern with 'language, ethnicity and inter-group relations' in the publications of Giles and his

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colleagues (Giles 1977), working within the specialised framework of social psychology. The attempt here, therefore, is to bring the kinds of issues, interests and methods that characterise the ethnographic approach to language and culture into relation with a concern with racism, its manifestations and oppositions in adolescent life as it is found in the British context.

A fundamental concern of this research was the cultural study of black/white adolescent friendship and contact patterns, and the relation these had to the formation and non formation of racist ideas and practices. Although, as has been indicated, the extent to which racial mixing occurs has been investigated within other disciplines, no study had taken as its starting point apparently successful inter-racial friendships themselves, or tried to examine the exact nature of such relationships or the way in which issues of racism manifest themselves and are processed within them. A longitudinal approach was needed, in order to examine the *course* of particular friendships, and to isolate, at least to some extent, the social pressures brought to bear upon those friendships. Thus, studying friendship and looking at those instances where racism appeared to be absent, or at a low level, would make it possible to see more clearly some of the factors which contribute to the existence of racism more widely amongst young people. In paradoxically seeking where racism appeared not to be, one could learn more about its mechanisms of reproduction.

A balance of data was essential to capture the *interactive* quality of the relationship between black and white youngsters, whilst still focusing on white adolescents. While both black and white sides of the friendships were to be reviewed, it was the white side that was to be treated as problematic, because white adolescent racism appeared to be common, even 'normal' in South London and more widely. A popular explanation of this has been 'rising youth unemployment' (Cochrane and Billig 1984) although, other than the linking of the presence of 'immigrants' with unemployment in the propaganda of the National Front and other extreme right-wing groups, no convincing account of the precise connections between these phenomena has been published. (In fact, without explicit connections being made, almost anything might be asserted as linked to unemployment after the late 1970s.) However such an explanation might be framed, it would need also to account for the apparently growing affinity between some sections of black and white working-class youth over the same period, as glimpsed, for example, in the numerous references in the press to the presence of white adolescents in the disturbances in Bristol and Brixton in 1980–1, which were ostensibly spontaneous black protests against policing levels and practices.

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The framework within which researchers seemed at first to choose to work were potentially ambiguous: the question (reflecting the dominant literature on the topic): 'What is the connection between inter-racial friendships and levels of prejudice?' would seem to suggest that 'levels of prejudice' within *individuals* was the focus. It is obvious, however, that no necessary connection can be established between these two aspects in any individual case. What emerged as a clear possibility, on the other hand, was that there might be a connection between the level of racism within a particular social locale and the local *patterns* of inter-racial friendship found in the adolescent community. On the basis of this possibility, individual friendships became less interesting for their own sakes and more interesting to the extent that processes within them were both part of and contributed to wider patterns of association and the relay of ideas and practices within and between peer groups. In a manner characteristic of ethnographic method, in looking at individual cases the research was to focus on the social dimension of adolescent existence, and to seek where possible to situate it within the wider context of social structures. Of especial importance were the interactive mechanisms, including sociolinguistic ones, by which the evaluative/ideological elements in the culture led, or did not lead, to an avoidance of racism.

A further reason to avoid being drawn into any estimation of individual 'levels' or 'degrees' of racism was that direct questioning regarding racial attitudes is very difficult where young people are involved, for they are at an age when they are only beginning to establish the relationship between their lived experience and social 'opinion' and 'knowledge' about it, even though it may be argued that the process itself *begins* with earliest socialisation. What, as a *processing* of social experience and social 'knowledge', comes more naturally than reasoned accounting, are the tentatively developed interactive cultural forms in which these matters are acted out rather than clearly articulated. Young whites are especially vulnerable to the apparent battery of ready-made, culturally available opinions and attitudes which come to occupy the space between their experience of race and their conceptualisation of it. A constant danger is that adolescents are over-impressed by the inquisitive attention of adults such as researchers, and like to be seen to have 'opinions' and to debate as adults have opinions and debate. When asked directly about race, there is a certain pride in giving adult-sounding, 'firm' views, with little regard for specific content. What is often provoked from young whites are formulaic responses, either prominent and racist ones they have heard 'validated' by adults or, less common but equally uninformative, those of the 'there's good and bad in all' kind. Such formulae, being only imitations of 'thoughtful' opinion, do not touch upon the complex-

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ities which few adolescents have the conceptual vocabulary truly to represent in the discourse of 'opinion'. The unerring uniformity of results in 'racial attitude' studies of young whites – which earnestly report the 'worryingly high levels of racial prejudice' – is clearly related to this fact.

What *is* true of such 'prejudice level' studies is that they do reveal racism in the culture because they reveal the formulaic corpus most readily available to young people and, possibly, the extent to which that corpus has, at the time, been nationally highlighted through media and other attentions. What such studies reveal or imply about young people beyond their recourse to this cultural 'resource' during an interview is, however, difficult to evaluate. This is not to say that young people researched in this way may not in fact *be* highly racist; but the way in which they are, and the particular form of racism in which they engage, may not be captured by explicit interview or by other techniques where 'the race issue' is approached directly. The social reality they live is not properly reflected in the narrow formulaic terms in which the issue is socially aired, and even less in the quantifiable units of research schedules which compress even more these limited terms.

If, however, it were true that the 'issue of race' did not exist outside of some such terms – terms which themselves constitute activated ideologies and fragments of ideologies – it would be more important to the formulation of this research to get at how these were acted out in daily life, and to establish how, on the one hand, racism was performed and transmitted and, on the other, what interactive features, types of social arrangements and communicative practices subverted or interrupted this. It was also important to write into the equation the surfaces of adolescent social life that moved obliquely around the edges of 'the race question' – now coming into prominence, now fading – that is to say, the social and cultural life within which young people were situated. In all these aspects, the place of language and the specific cultures of youth were of central importance.

Pilot work had indicated that black/white friendship was less common after school-leaving age, which, for most of the youngsters with whom I was concerned, meant the age of sixteen. Furthermore, the communicative aspect in which I was especially interested – the use of creole by whites – tended to occur in early teens. Informants were, therefore, recruited from the thirteen to seventeen age-range. In practice, most informants were fourteen or fifteen at the time of their first interview. By interviewing the same informants at three intervals of not less than six months in each case, four interviews, spread over an eighteen-month to two-year period – and sometimes over a longer period – were elicited

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from each. Thus, by the last interview, most had left secondary school or were on the verge of doing so. A few were as old as eighteen.

Informants were secured through personal contact, mainly by myself as a youth worker (part of the research involved participant observation in which I worked as a part-time youth worker in four different youth clubs) or through other of my informants on a 'snowball' basis. A total of seventy informants, black/white, male/female, were secured, of whom forty-four constituted the core group. The remainder gave only one or two interviews each, either individually or within group discussions. A further factor determining inclusion in the sample was residence. The research was divided between two areas, one of low Afro-Caribbean settlement, Area A, the other of comparatively high settlement, Area B, and care was taken to keep the black/white, male/female cells distributed as equally as possible within the two areas. Because of the areas chosen and, within these, the youth clubs selected as sites of participant observation, the samples from both areas are very predominantly working-class. A majority lived in local council-owned flats, and the parents of only a few were home-owners. Most of the youngsters left or expected to leave school at sixteen, although high levels of youth unemployment encouraged some to enrol at colleges of further education or to stay on in the sixth form to take or re-take examinations. Some had unskilled jobs, a few apprenticeships. Some were unemployed.

A necessary condition for the selection of white informants was that they had at least some black friends. Black informants were also chosen on the basis of their friendship with whites. There was no concern to measure the 'typicality' of my sample, nor what percentage of black/white friendships there was in each of the youth clubs. Clubs, in any case, had changing and fluctuating attendance and membership. The concern was simply to examine those cases where friendships *were* inter-racial, and to relate substantial interview material to observations of behaviour in the clubs and in other settings such as school and street. It was here that typicality was evaluated. Further contextualising ethnographic work was conducted with gangs and other groups of adolescents who were *not* part of the sample (see Chapters 1 and 2), and interviews were conducted with youth workers, teachers, area youth officers and others involved with young people in both areas. This contextualising ethnography, together with very long periods of participant observation, permitted an evaluation of what was said *about* the course and nature of inter-racial friendship and communication in the interviews.

Separate from this sample of interviewed informants, an additional thirty adolescents, distributed between three schools, volunteered to

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wear radio microphones during their school lunch periods and to have their speech monitored and tape-recorded. All three schools were within Area B, for reasons that are explained in Chapter 4. The objective of this was the examination of naturally occurring speech with regard to the *interactive* aspects of creole use. The speech of some additional subjects were recorded in other settings, including youth clubs and the street.

The areas of South London in which the research was conducted are not far apart from one another, but are somewhat different both socially and culturally. Area A is a varied, predominantly working-class area with lower-middle-class and professional enclaves. It is rather a patch-work of occupational levels, types of housing and political allegiances and has, for a number of reasons, always been something of an anomaly in South London. Removed from the inner city to the extent that it is sometimes disparagingly referred to by inner city dwellers as 'the country', it has, nevertheless, one of the oldest and strongest traditions of working-class industrial and political organisation in London. This tradition was founded upon a wide range of industries and crafts which flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century and earlier, when skilled workers predominated and the older trade unions, like the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, and the Operative Bricklayer's Society established a firm base for the working-class movement which later developed locally with such vigour. Indeed, the late-nineteenth-century working class of Area A included a substantial artisan elite, deeply committed to radical reforms and strongly influential in the Co-operative Movement. The area was also very important in the early development of the Labour Party.

Although the area suffered from many of the same housing problems as much of London in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and was certainly not without its own poor and 'disreputable' quarters at that time, the problems of over-crowding and slum conditions were never as acute as in many parts. The high number of large (and some very large) industrial employers also meant that unemployment was usually on a par with London as a whole, and sometimes actually far less of a problem.

The early decades of the twentieth century saw an expansion of industry, with electrical engineering becoming particularly dominant. Furthermore, the local Labour council, strongly committed as it was to a public housing policy, did much to improve the living conditions of the local poor during the 1930s, when unemployment and hardship were particularly acute. This same commitment to public housing was also evident immediately after World War II, when an energetic building policy was pursued in response to the housing shortage. Throughout this