Living with prejudice - xenophobia and race

CINDY WARNER and GILLIAN FINCHILESCU report on a study conducted with a group of refugees in Cape Town through which they explore the ways in which refugees experience xenophobia, and how they explain it

The contemporary anxiety about the perceived flood of illegal immigrants is well documented. A 1997 survey conducted by the Southern African Migration Project found that South Africans showed the highest level of opposition to immigration in any country where comparable questions have been asked (Mattes, 1999). The hostility towards foreigners living in South Africa has translated into extreme acts of xenophobic violence. In 2000 and 2001, Amnesty International's annual online reports on South Africa singled out attacks and ill treatment of asylumseekers and suspected illegal immigrants as a major source of concern. The 2001 report also recounts reports of

abuses of undocumented migrants and asylum-seekers. These included unlawfully prolonged detentions, poor conditions and beatings of detainees by guards at Lindela Repatriation Centre, assaults by police officers involved in the arrest of suspected illegal immigrants, and arbitrary and verbally abusive conduct towards asylum-seekers by Department of Home Affairs officials (Amnesty International, 2001).

Xenophobia is defined by the *Merriam Webster Dictionary* as 'fear or hatred of strangers or foreigners or of what is strange or foreign' (Mish, 1997). The literal meaning of the word suggests that xenophobic people would dislike all foreigners equally, as it is their 'foreignness' that makes them objectionable. However, the patterns that emerge of the targets involved in incidents that are attributed to xenophobia, as well as empirical research investigating xenophobia, suggest that this is not the case. Particular groups of foreigners are targeted, and the ethnic origins of these groups differ from country to country. In South Africa, xenophobia is racialised. The majority of the xenophobic incidents reported by the media are perpetrated against black (im)migrants and asylumseekers/refugees from other African countries. Studies investigating the experiences of refugees in South Africa have found that they experience racialised prejudice, with black South African men being the most hostile (Morris, 1998; Bouillon, 1997). Which particular foreigners are the targets of xenophobia in any given country may be determined by a number of factors, as discussed in various theories accounting for xenophobia. The South African media often explain xenophobia as the result of a competition for scarce resources. This explanation would appear to be supported by the commonly evoked stereotypes of an influx of African immigrants depriving South Africans of jobs. It is clear that the fear of all foreigners implicit in the term xenophobia is not an accurate reflection of phenomenon it is said to describe. For the purpose of this *briefing,* xenophobia is defined as the dislike of certain foreigners.

While research has established that South Africans are hostile toward foreigners living in South Africa, there is comparatively little research on how foreigners, particularly refugees, experience this prejudice. The traditional lack of emphasis on the targets' perspective (Harrison, Sigelman and Welch, 1991; Swim and Stangor, 1998) has resulted in a bias towards understanding the perpetrators rather than the targets of prejudice (Harrison, 1974). Research on the targets' experience of prejudice provides the opportunity to understand 'how targets manage aspects of their social world rather than how they are only manipulated by the prejudice of others' (Swim *et al,* 1998:38), and how targets are survivors, rather than victims, of prejudice.

This *briefing* is based on a study conducted in Cape Town as part of a Psychology Honours research project which aimed to explore the ways in which refugees experience prejudice, and how they explain it. It pursues the themes that emerged around xenophobia and race and demonstrates that men and women experience xenophobia in different ways.

The participants were recruited from refugee English classes taught by one of the authors. They were interviewed using a semi-structured interview designed to elicit information about their experiences in South Africa. The interviews were analysed using a thematic content analysis (Ely *et al*, 1991; Mostyn, 1985). The quotes are drawn from open-ended interviews with 12 refugees (names have been changed). The five women and seven men interviewed ranged in age from 17 to 38 years, with an average age of 24,33 years. Six of the participants were from Angola, five from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and one from Somalia. The length of the participants' stay in South Africa at the time of interviewing ranged from three months to three years, with the median length of time spent in South Africa being seven-and-a-half months.

A land of opportunity

According to the provisions of the South African Refugees Act (1998), a person who has been granted refugee status in South Africa has proved that s/he has chosen to leave his/her country of origin because of the threat of persecution or events that have seriously disrupted the public order. The majority of the refugees who have been granted asylum in South Africa have fled civil war or unrest at home. Many of the men participating in this study had left their families in Angola to avoid being permanently drafted into the army to fight UNITA rebels. The women from the DRC had fled with their families to escape the fighting in their country. While practical considerations of cost and proximity were important factors that influenced their choice to come to South Africa, participants viewed South Africa as a land of opportunity as well as a place of refuge:

Miguel: *I come here to...take more opportunities in [my life]. Because in Angola, I must be a soldier [at this] age, and here...there is freedom.*

South Africa was described as being the most developed country in Africa, and the most receptive to people fleeing persecution. The young men and the youngest woman interviewed also cited the high standard of education as a factor in choosing South Africa. Education in South Africa was described as expensive, but respected in their home countries. Many of the younger participants reported that their short term plans involved studying, with computers and engineering being popular choices. A young man from Angola described studying as a survival strategy, commenting:

Manuel: *If I take this course [computers], [when I return to Angola] I can go to the army, but I don't go to fight. If I study they say, 'this guy is clever, can't be [on the frontline], must stay here, work'...* .

All of the men in the study were single. The women had all come to South Africa with their husbands, or had some other family members already living in the country .They cited the relative security of South Africa as the main pull factor.

Participants expressed disillusionment with what South Africa has to offer them

In contrast to these positive images of South Africa as a place where refugees have opportunities to benefit from the relative prosperity of the country and develop skills, many participants expressed disillusionment with what South Africa has to offer those seeking refuge:

Miguel: *...you see, outside, all the people [think] that [South Africa is the most free country in Africa]. If you watch on TV, you can see South Africa is the better. But when the people come here, they can see (shakes head)...it's not...how we [thought].*

Experiencing prejudice

Participants spoke of feeling excluded and unwanted in their everyday life. This included when looking for

employment, enrolling at schools and universities, in dealing with officials and the police, and in the communities where they lived.

Quint (1999) and Morris (1998) found that securing employment is very difficult for foreigners living in South Africa. This was confirmed by the present study. Half of the participants had completed between 10 and 12 years of schooling, and the other half had tertiary qualifications. In spite of their high level of educational attainment, only three of the men and none of the women participants were employed at the time of interviewing. One man had previously been employed. The South African government does not provide any form of financial support for refugees, and the inability to find employment had resulted in considerable hardship for the participants. Participants felt that their efforts to make a life for themselves in South Africa were blocked. They attributed their difficulties to the fact that they are foreign, rather than to any other factor. Participants felt that being foreign was often an instant barrier to employment: 'Maybe when he asks, 'Are you foreigner?'- [you get] no job (Hélène).

'Go, go! Why don't you go back your country?'

Being foreign presented an obstacle for two participants who wished to continue their studies in South Africa. One of them, seeking to enroll for his final year of school reported: '...another school...they told me they can't...that there's no place for me to study there, because I'm foreign' (Carlos). The other, who had completed his second year of medicine in the DRC said of his application to a South African university:

I can say, the difficulty I got... . For my first choice, I chose medicine. But they told me...'It's only for South Africans' (Jean).

Participants spoke of instances where they were refused help by officials, which they again attributed to their 'foreignness'. Many participants had had negative experiences at the Office of Home Affairs, which dealt for their applications for asylum. They spoke of understaffing and indifferent, even hostile officials:

Manuel: *These people [at Home Affairs] are not nice. I've been this morning to change my paper[s]...long queue....They say to me, 'Go, go! Why don't you go back your country?' My papers [are now complete]... . This morning I go there, they say, 'Come tomorrow, come tomorrow'. Everyday, 'tomorrow'. Now the police can catch me... .*

Participants also felt unwanted in their day-to-day interactions with South Africans. They found language to present a substantial barrier. Both men and women spoke of how many people were unwilling to try to communicate with them because they didn't speak the same language. The women in the study generally spoke less English than the men, and this had proved an obstacle to finding work and integrating into their neighbourhoods. Participants felt that they would be refused help if they asked.

Manuel: *I was [staying] in Langa... . It was very very separatist...many people speak only Xhosa. They know that you [are a] foreigner, and you speak little English, but nobody want[s] to know about your language...[they] only speak with you in Xhosa. And you don't understand...you say help me, [but] nobody going to help you.*

Many participants mentioned that speaking their own language, or being unable to speak a South African language, made it easy for South Africans to identify them as being foreign. The women in particular recounted instances of being called *amakwerekwere* by strangers: 'If they see you are foreigner, you are *"kwerekwere"*. [They] give the name for all foreigners, *"kwerekwere"'* (Hélène). This derogatory term for foreigners refers to the unintelligible sounds of a foreign language. Some of the men felt that speaking their own language put them in danger. The women indicated that they felt annoyed, but not frightened by these incidents. In contrast, some of the men felt that speaking their own language placed them in danger. In general, although both the men and women saw themselves as vulnerable to crime, the men seemed to be more anxious about experiencing anti-foreigner violence than the women.

All participants felt that they were obviously foreign and easily identified as such: 'Because the way we walk,

the way dress' (Manuel). 'The blacks especially, they can say, "that is a foreigner". The clothes, they can see, this is a foreigner' (Hélène).

Participants reported being subjected to contradictory stereotypes. As foreigners, they were expected to be wealthy, but as refugees, they were perceived to be poor:

Juan: *Before I came here, when I lived in Joburg... . It was a Zulu, 6 o'clock one day, I'm going to work, I leave the house...he say, 'Give me money'. I say, 'I don't have money, I'm going to work now'. He say, 'You are foreigner, you from Angola, you must have money'.*

Jean: *Refugees [are] poor, for them...the black people, think...I'm black but, I don't know... . They think maybe before I came here I sleep outside... . They think that we are coming in South Africa, and we find only nice things, but in our country there is [nothing]... . They think that...'this one he just come here and find a house here. Maybe in his country he used to sleep outside'.*

Two participants had encountered hostile reactions from South Africans who believed them to be Nigerian:

When I was [working at a garage]...they say, 'You fucking Nigerian, why you come to South Africa?' (Abdul).

Another man trying to make friends in his neighbourhood was initially regarded with suspicion, as he was assumed to be Nigerian.

Carlos: *They used to say, 'You from Nigeria?' Oh no, I'm not from Nigeria! 'Oh!' On my first day, they used to look at me, I don't know if [they thought] I steal something, you know (laughs). I tell them, 'I'm not Nigerian (laughs), I'm from Angola'. Now they are my friends. Yeah. I don't know what's wrong with Nigerian people (laughs). All of the foreigners, black foreigners, here in South Africa, they used to think they [are] Nigerian...but not all.*

The stereotype of African foreigners, particularly Nigerians, being involved in illegal activities such as drug dealing is widely evoked by the media and government officials. The *Weekly Mail and Guardian* (September 23, 1994) reports that Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the Minister of Home Affairs, 'has lent weight to popular stereotypes by suggesting that all Nigerian immigrants are criminals and drug traffickers'. In the *Sunday Independent* (June 23, 1997 in Morris, 1997), Captain Bondesio Giacomo of the South African Police Service's Aliens Investigations Unit is quoted as saying of Nigerians: 'As far as I'm concerned, they don't come to South Africa for political reasons or to work', and went on to allege that,

as many as 90 percent of the Nigerians who applied for section 41 permits - which grant temporary residence to political asylum applicants - were drug dealers.

The participants believed that, as foreigners, they were targeted by criminals and preyed on by ordinary citizens:

Miguel: *The citizens don't work, this is their house, he don't work... . Don't like to work, to look for job. They wait in their house, and wait for foreigner people, [to] take his money.*

Participants who were known to be employed were seen to be at greater risk:

Manuel: *So, my friends was...[living] in this house, they was sleeping. Many people came to the house, open the door, [said] 'You are working, you have money, you must give us money. You are foreigner, you must give us money'.... Put fire, (motions locking the door) close windows. Nobody say nothing. Many people saw the criminals, but nobody say nothing. I know the cops know who is this man, but we are foreigners, what can we do?*

In addition to being vulnerable to crime, the men recounted stories of xenophobic attacks on foreigners who were unwelcome in local communities:

The men recounted stories of xenophobic attacks on foreigners

Carlos: *A lot of South African people think if you're foreign, you can't be like him. If you are foreign, you can't be able*

to [be] in this house, or in this club, because that club is not for foreigners... . I know it there in Mitchell's Plain. One of my, not really friend, but, he went into [a] club. Oh! Gangsters, they take their knives, put it in his body...they told him, is not foreigners' club, is [a] South African club.

Previous studies (Morris, 1998; Quint, 1999) found that interactions with the police were a major source of anxiety for foreigners. This was confirmed by the participants in the study: 'If you walk at night, and there are police, [who] saw you, they call you, put you on the wall (motions frisking) chase your body' (Manuel). Although both men and women were wary of the police, it was the men who felt more anxious about encounters with police.

Beyond the overzealous policing of the possession of the correct documentation, there were also allegations of mistreatment by the police:

Jean: *...one of my friends, in Johannesburg...police patrol...they told my friend, 'Passport!', they made him give it and (motions tearing). You can't understand this. And I mean, it was the black man, the policeman. You can't understand, ja, you can't understand.*

Participants felt bewildered by the hostility they experienced from black South Africans. They expected them to be emphatic as they had also experienced persecution and oppression.

Participants felt disempowered when they encountered hostility or abuse. The stories of violence against foreigners were salient about their unwillingness to retaliate against the injustices they experienced.

Participants felt disillusioned about their prospects as refugees in South Africa:

Abdul: *I think [foreign] people...in South Africa, didn't get [a] chance, didn't get [a] life... . After three years, or four years, all foreigners [they] go back. In South Africa, everybody*

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Participants reported that they were often stopped on the basis of their appearance and asked to provide evidence of their status

Some participants spoke about feeling trapped: 'They know that we are prisoners in this country. It's a game' (Manuel).

The racialisation of xenophobia

Mattes (1999) found that South Africans' attitudes towards foreigners differed according to whether the foreigners came from Southern Africa, West Africa, or Europe or North America, and whether the (South African) respondents were black or white. Black and white South Africans regarded Southern and West African foreigners as 'unfavourable', and European/North American as 'neutral', with black South Africans having a slightly more favourable attitude towards Southern and West Africans and white South Africans having a slightly more favourable attitude towards Europeans /North Americans. Mattes (1999) suggests that anti-foreigner sentiment or xenophobia in South Africa is racialised.

Participants reported that they encountered the most hostility from black South Africans, and black South African men in particular: 'The black man in general, they don't like us... . They pray day and night so that we leave' (Jean). This corresponds with the findings of previous studies (Bouillon, 1997; Morris, 1998) which found that foreigners living in South Africa are made to feel unwelcome, with black South African men being the most hostile to foreign men.

In explaining the hostility they encountered from black South Africans, the participants observed that South Africa is racially divided, with racial tensions and stereotypes:

Claire: *I tell you, apartheid is not finished. Many is [still] segregate[d]. It is not finished. Especially for black people.*

Manuel: *[It] is the people. These people is not nice, is not unite... . Because I'm foreign, when I see one guy Xhosa, ja, he talk shit about coloureds. I see this in my neighbourhood. When I talk with Xhosa people, 'Oh! Coloured people is like this. Coloured people, 'Oh, Xhosa? Is like this'.*

Participants felt that white South Africans were more sympathetic to their plight because they has been better educated under apartheid, and had had more opportunity to travel.

Gender and xenophobia

It emerged from the interviews that the participants were often stopped on the basis of their appearance, and asked to provide evidence of their status. When asked if police had asked to see her documentation, one woman commented: 'For the women, there is no problem, for the men, [it] is lot of problem'. This comment is an example of a sense of a gendered difference of experience that emerged from the interviews. The men that were interviewed communicated a sense of being persecuted, and the reason they gave for this was inevitably:

Miguel: *...black people from South Africa don't like other black people from [other countries] because they say that we come from other side to take my job, to take my wife, to take my life.*

Although the men who were interviewed could not explain why South African men feared that they would 'steal' 'their' women, the women were prepared to offer a few theories. These followed the same lines as those described by Morris (1998), with the women contrasting foreign men (especially Congolese men), who were said to be faithful, caring and generous, with South African men, who were perceived to be abusive and adulterous: 'You see the foreigners, if they get the wife, for example, a Xhosa, they gonna keep this wife, this girlfriend well' (Claire).

Hélène: T*he Xhosa lady don't like Xhosa man because he always (motions hitting)... . Not give her money... . They like foreigner, especially DRC.*

South African men fear that foreigners will 'steal' 'their' women

According to one woman, the antipathy towards foreigners based on the threat that they were perceived to pose in terms of commandeering the local women, was reciprocated by foreign men, who felt that South African men flirted with their partners. In her opinion, the South African men's fear of being overlooked by local women in favour of foreigners was well founded: 'But, their women here, the Xhosa, they like Congolese' (Rose).

All of the women in the study were unemployed and reliant on their husband and/or relatives' incomes. Although the English classes they attended were free, and the train fare partially reimbursed, the cost of the travel and the challenge of finding some-one to look after their young children made attending the class difficult for many women. For the most part they seemed isolated in their communities because of language difficulties and family obligations, and were less mobile than the men because of the cost of using public transport. Regardless of whether they had come to South Africa with their husbands, or had joined relatives already living in the country, and therefore had a relatively stronger support network, the women

all experienced similar difficulites integrating into their communities. Although they reported that they were less likely to be harassed by the police, they encountered similar hostility on the streets when identified as being foreign.

There is presently very little research on the similarities and differences of the prejudices experienced by men and women asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants. Although the present study did not set out to uncover the gendered differences of experiences of prejudice, the data suggests that this is an area that warrants further investigation, as does the difference in the experiences of attached versus single men and women refugees. Foreign women are seldom mentioned by the media, which tend to focus on the threat of 'foreigner men'. However, it was clear from the interviews that despite their lack of bad press, women experience hostility because they are foreign. The manifestations and reasons for these differences should be further researched. Another area important for investigation is the gendered differences of the strategies employed by foreigners to cope with the hostility they encounter.

'These foreigners, they come here, they start to work…they took our place'

Illegitimate competition

The women who were interviewed mentioned paying the rent and buying food for themselves and their families as a primary concern, while the men spoke of wanting to make a life for themselves in South Africa, which involved finding a job, a partner, and being able to buy things like cars and cell phones. In these aspirations, the men found themselves competing with South Africans wanting the same things. In some cases, this competition led to conflict. This conflict was seen to be primarily with unemployed, working class South Africans:

Abdul: *Some people hate me. If you meet someone [who has no job] [they say] '[He] take my job... . These foreign people take my money'. I think if all the foreign people go back, this people [still won't] work, [they don't] know how to get a job... . But if you say you get some money, or make a job, [they] hate, these people.*

Participants identified a sense that foreigners are perceived to be benefiting from the sacrifices made by many South Africans during the struggle against apartheid and resent this:

They say, 'We lose our jobs, our girls, our money. This job that you do, I can do it. I fight for this country, this freedom is for me' (Manuel).

Participants who had anticipated being able to make a life for themselves in South Africa had heard South Africans say that they were not entitled to do so. One participant spoke about hearing South Africans talking about how foreigners have taken the place of South Africans who deserved to be prospering in their own country:

Jean: *...it happened to me, again in the bus, ja. I had my cell phone, and it ring, someone phoned me. My neighbour, in the bus, start to talk to one another, and he go like this (shakes his head). [I was speaking] Swahili. He just talk in Zulu, with a bit of English. And they said, 'These foreigners, they just go out, and they come here, they start to work...they took our place. This cellphone should be mine. And this foreigner, this guy, he has a cellphone. This is my country'.*

This suggests a view of xenophobia as being a fundamentally socio-economic problem, explaining hostility towards foreigners in terms of competition for scarce resources. As both research and history has shown, in a context where the majority of a population are experiencing economic difficulties, they are more likely to feel threatened by minorities, particularly if these minorities are foreign (Pettigrew, 1957; Balock, 1967; Quillian, 1995(all cited in Morris, 1998). This no-tion is consistent with the thesis of power theory, which states that the relations between groups are a function of their competitive positions (Pedahzur and Yishai, 1999). This common sense explanation has wide currency in the South African media. However, the prevalence of xenophobia in a society is not necessarily directly linked to levels of unemployment (Wimmer, 1997). The key

factors in determining the level of xenophobia present in a society appear to be perceptions about legitimate and illegitimate competition, and perceptions about equality and difference (Wimmer, 1997), with the amount of hostility directed towards foreigners being proportional to the threat that they are perceived to pose (Pedahzur and Yishai, 1999; Legge, 1996).

Conclusion

The refugees who participated in this study experience prejudice in many aspects of their everyday lives. They feel unwelcome, stereotyped and targeted, and believe black South Africans to be particularly hostile towards them. Crime is rife in South Africa, and asylum seekers, refugees and illegal immigrants are particularly vulnerable. The fact that they are generally resented and disliked in the communities in which they live, and are wary of the police means that they are likely to experience more crime than the average South African citizen. They experienced xenophobia, in that they attributed the prejudice they encounter to the fact that they are foreign rather than any other factor.

It is argued that xenophobia in South Africa is racialised, in that not all foreigners are equally disliked. Race is an important part of the participants' explanations of who is prejudiced against them and why. Participants felt that apartheid has created a society where black South Africans have been denied the opportunities for education, travel and employment that white South Africans have had. The legacy of this deprivation is a large sector of the population who do not have training and skills to compete for jobs in a slow economy. In this context, the presence of foreigners who are competing for scarce employment opportunities is unwelcome. The participants felt that black South Africans resented their presence in the country because they believed that it was not fair that foreigners (rather than South Africans) should benefit from the fruits of the struggle against apartheid, and the opportunities in the 'new' South Africa. According to Wimmer (1997), this is a key factor in determining the levels of anti-foreigner sentiment in a country. The fact that foreigners are perceived to be prospering illegitimately in South Africa is seen by the participants as a core reason for the high levels of anti-foreigner sentiment they experience.

There emerged from the data a sense of a gendered difference of experience, in that men seemed to experience hostility more frequently than women. There was also mention of foreign men 'stealing' South African women, and the reasons why South African women might prefer to become involved with foreign men, which centred around the perception that foreign men treat women better. Apartheid created circumstances that deprived many men of traditional ways of demonstrating power, such as being the breadwinner, and having a say in governing the community. Under such circumstances, violence and control over women may be the only expression of power and masculinity available to these men. While the same might be true of refugee men, this did not emerge from the data. Further research into the racialised and gendered aspects of xenophobia may shed light on aspects of our own society, as well as the experiences of foreigners seeking refuge in South Africa.

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