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Celebrity Big Brother 'White Trash' Row Hides Truth about Middle Class Racism

Research conducted by the Institute for Policy Studies in Education (IPSE), London Metropolitan University.

Since the controversial events on Celebrity Big Brother we have been obsessed with the question 'was it racism?'. Those who say 'no' talk about culture clash and bullying. Those who say 'yes' focus on specific individuals and construct them as different from the rest of us.

- ❖ Media attention portrays Jade, Jackie, Danielle and Jo as a freakish 'coven of racist white trash ladettes' and winner Shilpa as rescued from racism by the normal decent British people who voted them out
- ❖ In fact, events in the house are typical of the everyday experiences of black and minority ethnic people in the UK
- ❖ Racism is often unintentional and is perpetrated by people from all sectors of society
- ❖ Far from confronting racism, the debate has deflected attention away from middle class racism and from racism's social and institutional causes
- ❖ Liberal middle class people scapegoat 'chavs' and 'white trash' but their own assumptions and choices are shaped by racism

Coverage of Celebrity Big Brother has portrayed racism as the preserve of the white working class. This is far from the reality of life in contemporary Britain as an Economic and Social Research Council funded project on school choice in the inner city shows

Sumi Hollingworth, a researcher on the project, says: 'Blatant name-calling is seen as the domain of the white working classes/trash but in our research with urban professional middle class parents racism is more subtle but its still there.'

These parents often assumed that black children achieve less well at school and come from unmotivated homes.

One middle class female parent said: 'Stephen (her son) can do a wonderful imitation of a South London black kid and that dismays me sometimes. I say "Why do you want to talk like that?" but, you know, I don't think he's going to do it forever because environment is so important and he doesn't come from a home where he's not expected to do well.'

They present white working classes as the ones who avoid 'black schools', ignoring the latent racism displayed by many middle class parents who have opted out of the state comprehensive system altogether:

Another parent, a male journalist, commented: 'Among certain people, and I would say it was sort of white working classes, there was surprise that we'd sent our kids to the (local comprehensive school) because they'd say that's the black school.'

Another middle class male parent put responsibility for racism and school failure onto: 'White trash class families who basically are the third generation of Thatcher's dross or whatever. Actually if you get too many of those in the school then it is actually much worse than people of different colour and races, frankly.'

IPSE researchers have conducted a wide range of research into race, class and education. Other relevant research includes Jocey Quinn's research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on young, white working class men who dropped out of university and were labelled as white trash failures.

Jocey also found that the middle classes pathologise behaviour amongst the white working class, which they see as normal and even desirable for themselves. She concluded that: 'Aggressive assertion is a considered a valuable quality in Parliament but not on a sink estate.'

The Celebrity Big Brother row confirms that we need to stop blaming 'white trash' for all the ills of our society and that the middle classes need to own their own responsibilities for racism and social inequality.

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