

# Representing Race and Crime

Colin Webster discusses two aspects of supposed media effects - on criminal behaviour and on fear of crime - in relation to media representations of race, ethnicity and crime.

From the early 1990s supposed drug use and selling, criminality, disorder and gang conflict were depicted in the media as associated with groups of young Asian men, seen previously as belonging to a 'law-abiding' community. This served to feed the popular media's stock-in-trade of 'resolving' the nature of social and symbolic order, and drawing moral boundaries, whilst at the same time posing problems of how race and ethnicity is represented and understood. Although not new (Hall et al 1978), claims of lawlessness among (some) young Asian men in Bradford, Sheffield, Birmingham, London and other towns and cities has been widely reported by national and especially local news media.

teachings and feel that they have great difficulty in controlling them." (quoted in the Independent 12.6.95). Not a shred of evidence was presented to support this contention. An alternative (and paradoxical) explanation could have been that the disorders arose out of disillusion among Asian young men with the police's ability to maintain order fairly and in ways that reflected their concerns. At the time there were determined campaigns by young Muslim men to rid the area of affronts to civility such as prostitution and street drunkenness! This interpretation was not and could not be explored because it did not fit into the pre-established framework that associated the inner city, an ethnic presence and crime and disorder.

## **What are the sources of these explanations and how accurate are they?**

In contrast to popular news, 'quality' news media offered secondary explanations about 'Asian' crime using ideas of 'Asian-ness' and the 'Asian community', which is said to contain opposing forces of discipline and disorder (Webster, 1997). Discipline is said to arise from the collective nature of 'Asian' family life and community structure, whilst supposed rises in levels of disorder and crime are seen as indicating conflict between these traditional values and the growing secular, western orientated and consumerist values of young people. What are the sources of these explanations and how accurate are they? The nature of news production and organisations, and the tight schedules placed upon them, means that journalists are compelled to return again and again to the same elite of authorities who are regular sources (experts, government officials, lobbyists, police officers) or to other sources (community leaders), and to people who buy into their particular popular ideologies of crime. In the vast majority of instances (90 per cent), sources offer no evidence to support their statements or claims, this being based instead on their 'credibility' - their organisational affiliation and status.

For example, in commenting on the disorders in Bradford, West Yorkshire, in June 1995, Keith Hellowell, then Chief Constable of West Yorkshire Police, identified the roots of these disorders in a widening cultural and generation gap within the 'Asian' community stating "Cultural and religious leaders have been worried for the past ten years or so that the younger generation don't follow their

## **False inference**

Shortly after Hellowell's comments, the then head of London's police force, Sir Paul Condon, wrote a letter to community 'representatives' which stated that "very many perpetrators of muggings are young black people." The leaked letter generated the usual popular media racist implication: 'most muggers are black, therefore blacks are much more likely to be muggers than whites'. However this apparent 'truth', permits a false inference and prediction about black people as a group in relation to mugging behaviour, encourages fear of black young people, and leaves out the fact that only a tiny minority of young black people are responsible for the majority of muggings in London Boroughs.

And again, explanations that offer an alternative to racial identity are never explored, for example the ready association of some young men everywhere, black and white, with multifarious, amateurish and opportunistic street crime (mostly categorised as 'mugging'), or the fact that in metropolitan areas having relatively small black populations like Newcastle and Glasgow most 'muggers' are white, or that black robbers are more likely to be reported if their victims are white, nor that proportionally more young blacks than young whites are stopped and searched by the police, or that any (small) propensity towards certain crimes is likely to reflect the very different opportunity structures and socio-economic situations of young London black and white populations (making direct racial comparisons meaningless). Even if some young black men in certain areas were disproportionately committing street crime (which victim reports and Home Office statistics seem to suggest), this tells us very little about the individuals involved and their motives, and

nothing about the (radicalised) group to which they are said to belong. The point is that popular news media in their nature cannot enter into these secondary explanations, and when 'quality' news media do, they rely on authoritative sources rather than evidence. This matter can be ended with an imaginary London headline 'MOST BURGLARS ARE WHITE'.

The pre-established 'ideological closure' around this issue that comes to define all subsequent discussion about race, ethnicity and crime vilifies young black men as a group and repositions young Asian men from being (weakly) perceived primarily as victims of crime and violence to being (strongly) perceived as a threat to law and order.

### Media branding and 'black' crime

Although direct influences between images and effects are unlikely to ever be found, I will speculate about the potential influence the mass media is said to have on creating the preconditions for crime to take place. Not only does the news media's obsession with stories of crime, law and justice reflect its role as a primary cultural source for defining acceptable behaviour, identity, and reality, mass popular media (advertising, cinema, etc.) instructs people on what to be as well as what to do (Reiner, 1997). For example, Burney's (1990) study in Lambeth suggested that street crime is overwhelmingly committed by a hard core of persistent and serious young black street robbers. She argues that neither income, poverty or homelessness were the immediate motives for street crime since the outstanding characteristic of young street robbers was their avid adherence to a group 'style' which dictates a very expensive level of brand-name dressing, financed by crime. They did not lack necessities, but neither were they well-off. However, they craved luxuries, and expensive dressing was connected to the assertion of macho power and status among posers of young people, who "were totally dominated by the consumer image being thrust at them daily", and "for which they were prepared to rob, and rob violently if necessary."

As Naomi Klein's excellent *No Logo* shows, media based corporate branding aimed at the youth market becomes more influential and important than providing young people with meaningful and productive employment. At the same time, branding derives its images from, emulates and celebrates 'street culture'. In flattering and seducing its youth audience with images of high-octane, consumerist and affluent street style, it can accentuate relative deprivation, that can generate pressures to acquire ever greater levels of 'branding' success regardless of the legitimacy of the means used. Gilroy (2000) implies that the 'cool' images that corporate branding aim at young people are derived from black street culture and representations of the black male body. This can form an intimate resonance

between media branding, aspiration and crime among some unqualified black and white young men.

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*Perpetrators of street crimes were white, Asian or black*