The Trouble with Black (Male) Youth

Anthony Gunther summarises his study into the reality, rather than the stereotypes, of black youth.

Academic and media interest with black (African-Caribbean) British youth, has largely been restricted to the perennial 'problems' posed by young black men, with young black women seemingly invisible. Furthermore, when looking at the innumerable indices ofsocial alienation and discrimination, it is more than likely that young African-Caribbean males will head many of the lists that detail poverty, mental illness, school exclusions,educational under-achievement, and criminal conviction rates.

For some commentators poverty and institutionalised racism are still the root causes for this continued social marginalisation. Their arguments are bolstered by the plethora of reports that highlight amongst other things teacher racism in schools (particularly toward African Caribbean young men) and the prevalence of institutionalised racist practices within the Crown Prosecution Service that deny African Caribbean male defendants equal treatment in court (Crown Prosecution Service, 2003).

By discussing black youth in generalised and stereotyped terms, it is easy to forget that they are all unique individuals (like all young people) with their own personal biographies, hopes, fears and dreams.

In contrast, many other writers play down such politically correct interpretations, preferring to place the blame on an urban black male youth culture that is anti-school and obsessed with the violence and hyper-masculinity of the street (see Sewell, 1997).

Ironically, whilst approaching the issue from opposing perspectives both interpretations readily buy into populist news-media stereotypes that portray all young black men as belonging to a larger homogenous collective. The gun crazed actions of a small minority of individuals become, in the public imagination, indicative of a lawlessness besetting all black British youth, and illustrate how irrevocably alienated they have become from the mores, values and institutions of wider British society.

Black young men growing up in such disparate places as Manchester, High Wycombe and London, whilst sharing a commonality of experience, will nonetheless have to contend with many other challenges that are locally specific. Whilst there might be a small group of young men in Aston (North Birmingham) who are involved in gun related crime, it is disingenuous to then claim that large numbers of their peers in Manchester, Huddersfield and London are doing like-wise.

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of empirical research that attempts to holistically explore the complexities and differences within contemporary black British youth experience. Such studies that are rooted within local neighbourhood settings, would provide a counterweight to the perpetual stereotyping of black male youth as the perennial criminal 'other' (Keith, 1993).

My own ethnographic youth study based in an East London neighbourhood set out to explore, at a local level, the complex and subterranean ways in which young people attempt to actively govern their own lives.

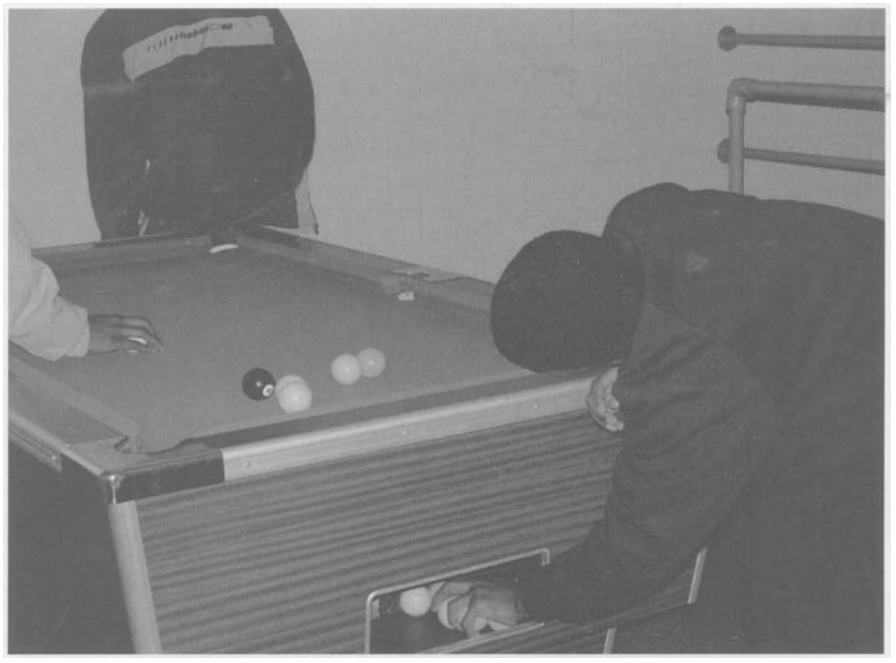
Rather than just being concerned with racism and urban multiculture (Back, 1996) or black youth sub-cultures and schooling (Sewell, 1997), I have attempted to take into account: the significance of local 'place'; home-life and kinship networks; peer group relationships; leisure time activities and young people's post-16 choices/opportunities/experiences. The majority of those who participated in my research bore no resemblance to the caricatured representations of the dangerous and disenfranchised urban young black male.

In truth, there is a small hardcore grouping of individuals (who are referred to as 'rude boys') who immerse themselves in 'badness' – a subterranean social world characterised by violent crime, fraud, and other modes of hyper-masculine behaviour – and attempt to police the physical space of their neighbourhood by exercising control and dominance (through bullying and violent intimidation) over their more vulnerable male peers.

However, there were much larger numbers of young men who were neither choirboys nor lawless gun toting drug dealers. Such young men had aspirations to do well in school by attaining a clutch of formal qualifications, in order to secure for themselves a 'phat job' (well paid job) and a 'nice ride' (flashy car).

Unfortunately, due to the complex interplay of personal psychology, class, gender, ethnicity and peer group pressures, many of the young black male informants under-performed academically and not surprisingly perceived school to be boring, irrelevant and over burdened with 'rude teachers'.

Nevertheless, whilst many of the young men left school with little or no formal qualifications, they did not then choose to undertake an alternative career



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of crime and drug fuelled deviancy. The majority of them enrolled on full time vocational type courses at one of the many local colleges of further education, in addition to obtaining part-time paid employment, such as retail shop assistants and play leaders. The much smaller number of individuals ('rude boys') who did opt out of the formal economy, chose alternative career paths that incorporated fraud, property crime and other violent types of offending.

Such young men might look to 'Jack' (mugging/street robbery) or violently 'rob' more vulnerable young people of their possessions – including jewellery, money and mobile phones. Most of the 'Jacking' or street robberies that took place within the neighbourhood were opportunistic and might easily be described as street bullying.

For any of the small grouping of young black men involved in 'Badness', activities like 'Jacking' were undertaken not because of a need to fund an expensive urban lifestyle (see Burney, 1990), but more about the maintenance and enhancement of 'rude boy' reputations and levels of respect within the neighbourhood (see also, Harrington and Mayhew, 2001).

Whilst the majority of black young men were not interested in perpetuating 'Badness', their sub-cultural style and fashions were very much influenced by the hyper-masculine attitudes and personas of their 'rude boy' peers. The majority of young black young men (and their white/Asian peers) living in the neighbourhood tended to walk around in small groups, wearing designer sports wear, hooded sports tops and jackets – normally with hoods up in blazing sunshine. They also adopted a 'screw face' expression – described at best as a blank expression, and at worst as hostile and aggressive – in order to warn potential male foes that they are not to be 'messed with'.

Unfortunately, to the outside world these young men are indistinguishable from the small minority of 'rude boys', or any other groups of black youth residing in any number of the many urban neighbourhoods throughout the country.

By discussing black youth in generalised and stereotyped terms, it is easy to forget that they are all unique individuals (like all young people) with their own personal biographies, hopes, fears and dreams. In order to actively support those young men who might be struggling to maintain their focus in school or college, it is imperative that policy makers and practitioners implement strategies that address the individual and localised needs of such young people. Similarly, academics that are concerned with the perennial black youth question need to undertake holistic research, which begins to localise and personalise the many black British youth experiences.

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References

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