



Being Black and in Trouble: The Role of Self-perception in the Offending Behaviour of Black Youth

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Abstract

Young black people in British society are often linked with images of criminality and delinquency. This study aimed to investigate self-perception in young black male offenders. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants and included questions relating to family background and perceptions of society and themselves. A group discussion was also undertaken to elaborate further on topics raised in the interviews. A 'grounded theory' approach was used to analyse the data and ten key themes emerged, which included: the importance of black history; ability to define their ethnic background; normal levels of self-esteem; negative representations of black people and lack of a role model. The methodological limitations in this study are discussed. Notwithstanding these, however, the findings suggest that racial identity is an important part of self-perception for black young offenders and it is recommended that this needs to be taken into consideration when working with young black people in the criminal justice system.

Keywords: black people, criminal justice, identity, self-perception, youth

Introduction

Models of black racial identity

Models of racial identity for the African/African-Caribbean (black) experience are predominately based upon the American literature. Given that there are many similarities to the black experience in Britain, and in the absence of sustained research in the UK, such models are considered here. Cross (1971) proposed a model of racial identity – derived from psychology – that described 'stages' of black identity which he called 'Nigrescence'. The five stages of Cross' model are as follows:

1. *Pre-encounter* is described as the anti-black attitudes that cause an individual to think, act and behave in ways that devalue his or her own racial identity.

2. The *encounter* stage instigates the individual to search for alternative meanings of their racial group membership.
3. In the *immersion-emersion* stage, identity is described as being in transition. In this stage people work on trying to construct a different understanding of their race and are often in search of what it means to be black. During this stage an individual will become totally immersed in his or her own racial group identity, and racial group pride is high.
4. Emergence from immersion-emersion is not explained but the next stage in Cross' model is *internalization*. Any conflicts about racial identity are resolved and overall concern for humanity replaces negative other-group attitudes. During this stage, individuals develop coping strategies to deflect the negative impact of prejudice and discrimination, which also averts negative outcomes such as criminal behaviour.
5. The final stage is *internalization-commitment* during which the sense of attachment and commitment to racial and social equality, such as multi-culturalism, is formed. Thus, individuals are able to sustain distinct identities that are representative of their own culture or racial group, among other cultural or racial identities. This kind of multiple identity approach is considered an adaptive and healthy way to construct group identity within a diverse society.

Also drawing on psychology, Taylor (1980) developed the Pittsburgh model of racial group identity that consisted of 'identity prototypes' similar to Cross' model. The Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) incorporates some of the notions proposed by Cross and defines racial identity in African-Americans as the importance and qualitative meaning that individuals ascribe to their membership within the black racial group within their self-concepts (Sellers et al., 1998). This raises the question 'How important is race in the individual's perception of self?' In an attempt to answer the question, the MMRI makes a number of assumptions. First, the MMRI assumes that identities are situationally influenced in addition to being stable properties of the individual. Second, the MMRI assumes that individuals have many different identities – including class, gender and 'race' – which are hierarchically ordered. The individual's perception of their racial identity, however, is judged to be the most compelling indicator of their identity.

Racial identity and self-esteem

The assumption that if one's 'group' is an important part of one's 'self', then dislike for one's group by another dominant group will inevitably result in lower self-esteem remains questionable, especially since 'ethnic minority children are no longer showing such a strong preference for the majority group' (Hutnik, 1991: 70). Black political movements in the 1960s produced slogans like 'Black is indeed beautiful', which served to develop black consciousness and led to an increase of self-esteem among black people. Equally, pro-black responses in African-Caribbean children in the UK tend to be associated with higher levels of self-esteem (Young and Bagley, 1982). A review of the studies that have assessed both racial identity and self-esteem in the same children have found, however, that 'young black people can have negative feelings about their racial identity and yet have a positive self-concept' (Tizard and Phoenix, 1994: 94). Research has indicated that although self-esteem and personal efficacy is usually

positively correlated, black Americans tended to display higher levels of self-esteem or sense of worth than of efficacy or sense of control (Hughes and Demo, 1989, cited in Dooley and Prause, 1997). This suggests that for black people, self-worth stems more from associations with their family and friends, while personal efficacy derives more from their location in society, including their class status.

Criminality and social status

Tajfel's (1978) theory of minority group psychology consists of four processes: social categorization; social identity; social comparison and psychological distinctiveness. Social categorization is defined by social or group categories of daily life – including class, gender and 'race' – and acts like a template for making sense of society and for organizing perception of self and others. Social categories also 'create' social identities by changing self-definitions and forming a value system. Tajfel's theory makes the assumption that individuals strive for a positive social identity. In constructing a positive social identity the individual makes favourable comparisons between the in-group and other social groups. It is difficult for the ethnic minority individual to attain a sense of positive identity because of the inferior position they generally hold in society in comparison with the majority.

A further theory which addresses group comparisons and conflict is Social Dominance Theory (SDT), which proposes that any hierarchical social structure will have a dominant group at the top and a subordinate group or groups at the lower end of the hierarchy. The theory suggests that prejudice within group-based hierarchies are not simply a product of oppression by members of the group at the top of the hierarchy (dominants), but that members of groups at the low end of the hierarchy (subordinates) are also active agents in their own oppression (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). By accepting policies that favour dominants, subordinates are engaging in 'system justification' (Jost and Banaji, 1994). System justification arises when a current social structure is accepted and supported because it is difficult to imagine a different social structure. The support of the current structure may occur through consensual ideology, in which subordinates endorse legitimizing myths that maintain the status hierarchy or engage in self-defeating behaviours based on acceptance of legitimizing myths about one's subordinate group.

The notion of 'culture of subordination', for example, implies that some members within subordinate (black) groups have developed cultural values and behaviours over time which makes it difficult to fully realize and exploit their human potential. This culture of subordination develops into many different forms of self-defeating behaviours such as lower motivation for school achievement, higher rates of drug abuse and greater tendencies to use extreme violence when faced with a dispute:

These self-defeating behaviours are a result of the self-loathing and inner-directed aggression that result from severe and long-standing oppression and subordination.

(Sidanius et al., 1998: 158)

Other factors contributing to youth crime

Moral panic was ignited in the media and across society when Enoch Powell made the statement in 1976 that 'mugging' was a 'racial crime' with black youths as the main

actors. Mugging became a political phenomenon associated almost exclusively with black youth (Hall et al., 1978). Thus, young blacks felt that because of where they lived, their style of dress and their leisure activities, they were discriminated against by the police and were always viewed as potential suspects.

Since the late 1970s, and especially after the uprisings in many British cities in the 1980s, the political debates about the 'black crime' issue has been considered against the backdrop of urban unrest and civil disorder (Solomos, 1991). And so, the 'race and crime' debate continued through the 1990s and into the 21st century with little progress in relations between black youth and the police. Arrest rates from 1999/2000 indicate that around four times more black people were arrested than would be expected when compared with the general population (Home Office, 2000):

The pattern of selective enforcement and harsher criminal justice outcomes for African-Caribbeans is consistent with cultural stereotyping and the 'heightened suspicion' of African-Caribbeans that has emerged in empirical studies in the last two decades.

(Phillips and Bowling, 2002)

In today's public discourse and media representations, black youths are still represented as 'dangerous others' and are in many respects turned into scapegoats in society (Chomsky, 1995). These images have led to conclusions that it is impossible to disentangle the myth of black criminality from its 'reality' (Gilroy, 1987). Indeed, the image of black youth as susceptible to violence and crime continues to persist with numerous references to negative influences of hip-hop music and culture as part of the problem (Rose, 1994; Dyson, 1996). The focus of 'gangsta' rap appears to be in the glamorization of violence, material consumption and misogyny. Although these images are quite alarming, the debate should be broadened to evaluate how these images fundamentally imitate ancient stereotypes of black identity (Dyson, 1996).

Critical Race Theory (CRT), which emerged in the mid-1970s emphasizes the social construction of race and discrimination. CRT is a body of legal theory that includes ideas such as 'race' is a social construct, not as a biological given, and that storytelling is a significant part of the law, and disenfranchised people(s) have different stories and different ways of telling them than enfranchised people(s). Thus, critical race theorists believe that in order to understand the perspective of oppressed racial minorities, the voice of an individual deserves to be heard and must be understood in terms of that individual's own narrative, which will be different from dominant culture of hegemonic whiteness (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado, 1995).

For young black males in society – in school, in the courts or on the streets – how they are recognized by others impacts on their narrative and how they recognize themselves. The study outlined below presents an opportunity to explore how stereotypes and ideology impact on the attitudes and offending behaviour of young black male offenders; furthermore, it provides them with a forum and opportunity to voice their experiences of life and of the Criminal Justice System. The study also seeks to contribute to literature on young black male offenders by attempting to identify those aspects of racial identity that could be informative with regards to their offending behaviour, addressing questions such as 'What is the role of ethnicity in explaining offending, victimization and criminal justice practices?'

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of eight black male offenders between the ages of 15 and 17 who agreed to participate in the study. All had been sentenced in a Youth Court within the last 12 months for a criminal offence and were currently serving a community order involving Youth Offending Team (YOT) supervision. All the young offenders lived in the same London borough.

Process

YOT officers in one London borough were given an advert with a brief description of the study to pass onto black young offenders under supervision. Contact was then made with young offenders who agreed to take part in the study. Participation was entirely voluntary and participants were made anonymous in the presentation of the research. They were also assured limited confidentiality, whereby disclosure of information would only be passed to a third party if it concerned harm to the participants themselves or others. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. An information sheet detailing the purpose of the study and a consent form was given to all participants to complete before they took part. If they were under 16 they needed to get their consent form signed by their parent or guardian. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant and these were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Four weeks after the last interview was conducted, all the participants were invited to and attended a group discussion session to explore the issues raised in individual interviews. This was to facilitate further discussion of the ideas presented by the young people in the individual interviews. Notes were taken at the session but not a verbatim record.

Interview schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule was constructed for use in the study. Questions covered the following key issues: demographic and background details; education; self-esteem; interests; racial identity and offending behaviour.

Data Analysis

In keeping with the objective of presenting the young people as they see themselves, their own self-description of ethnic group membership was used. In the text, the names of the participants have been changed to preserve their anonymity. In analysing the interviews with the participants, a thematic framework was developed based upon the central research questions. Principally these were:

1. What is it really like for the young people in their community?
2. How does society regard black people, in the eyes of the young people?
3. What impact do representations of black people have on the young people and their offending behaviour?

A coding frame was developed on the basis of the identified themes. The four themes identified comprised of sub-themes and each theme was assessed based on eight criteria: intensity/emotion; contradictions; evaluation; absence; group dynamic; associated themes; frequency and depth. The shared characteristics of the themes (frequency and depth) were examined against the individual beliefs held by the participants. Thus, the material is analysed from both a cultural perspective (what beliefs and practices are shared) and from a psychological perspective (individual differences, ideas and emotions).

Results

Experiences of group inequality in institutional settings

Participants typically gave prominence to the importance of black history and its value to black people in understanding their background:

Yeah, it's always good to learn where you are coming from, your background and stuff.
(Tony)

Despite these assertions, the young people themselves had varying amounts of knowledge of black history – three participants had no awareness of black history and were unable to communicate any information on this subject. Yet it seems as though they long for this knowledge, as Paul responded:

I don't even know that much about black history, they never really taught black history in school. I think they should, to know about the black people's history.

The young people believe black history to be important, but are unable to explain what its precise relevance might be.

Of all the interviewees, Steve illustrates that he possessed the most knowledge of black history and provides a passionate account giving an insight as to what he believes is essential for black youth to know:

I know what they will teach in school, they might teach you half a paragraph on Malcolm X, same thing for Martin Luther King . . . but they don't teach you the real thing – what really happened We wanna hear about us, we don't wanna hear about the fucking Romans, we don't want to hear about the Saxons, the Anglos and that. That's nothing to do with us, you understand. I suppose if they were preaching it (black history) then we would listen, we would have no choice but to listen, but they not preaching it are they?

Steve identifies inequality within the National Curriculum and in schools resulting in the lack of teaching about black history, which should play a part in the development of black children:

A thorough knowledge of black history is important Black people don't know themselves living in a white man's society. That's why we shoot each other and shit, 'cos we don't know ourselves. We see guns, we want them; we see clothes we want them – what we need to know is ourselves.

This interviewee suggests that the absence of black history, which contributes to black people's identity, leads to the occurrence of crime among black people, especially

black-on-black violence. Furthermore, there was also the opinion that the teaching of black history should not just be limited to black people but:

It should be taught to everyone, it should be like a subject or like a topic in history, everyone should learn it.

(Robert)

There is the notion that the acquisition of knowledge on black history has equal value for society as a whole as it has for black people.

What emerged through discussions about the young people's experiences with the police was the feeling that they were not treated fairly when both parties come into contact. There was a range of different opinions, from general indifference – 'I don't really pay any attention to them' (Tony) – to hatred of the police – 'Hate them, I hate them until I would never call the police' (Robert). The interviewees described circumstances in which they felt that the police treated them differently because they are black. Victimization appears to be a frequent occurrence that is experienced by the young offenders, who feel constantly under scrutiny from the police. Six of the young offenders present the idea that the police unfairly focus on black people; this usually takes place in the form of 'stop and search'. The interviewees believe that the police act in this manner to humiliate them, as Robert recalls an occasion when the police 'stopped the traffic just to show me up'.

Furthermore, the young offenders feel as though they are powerless and in a no-win situation with the police. They feel that the police behave unfairly towards them and do not treat them with respect. Yet, although they are aware that complaints can be made, they have their reservations:

But then again, there's not much that you can do about it, even though you make complaints nothing happens to them.

(Paul)

They tell us like 'Who are people gonna believe, a little criminal like you or three police people?' Once they say that you just don't really say nothing after that 'cos no one is gonna believe you. You can't take it to court and expect to get something out of it. I'll never have no respect for the police.

(Robert)

Despite the interviewees' experience with the police, documented above, there were few complaints and the general consensus was that the young people were 'well represented' (Tony) by their solicitors and knew 'everything what was going on' (Paul) when going through the youth justice system. Kelvin reveals that he had a degree of trust in his solicitor and felt that he could be reasonably honest with him:

People say that certain solicitors work for the police, you know but that's bullshit. Even if you tell your solicitor that you've done the crime yeah, he still can't go and say nothing to no one.

Acceptance of legitimizing myths about black culture

The majority of the participants held negative views on black people in general. For example, Kelvin initially states that he 'just looks at everyone like they are the same'; however, on further reflection, he reveals how he really views black people:

I don't go to a rave when it's packed out with black people blood When you go to dem type of places like . . . dem type of places are trouble man, you're looking to get shot or stabbed or something blood I look at black people like black people are just killing black people at the end of the day, you get me blood, we are just killing each other when I check it.

Black people are associated with aggression, violence and criminal activity, which ultimately leads to the destruction of the black population. Steve echoed this view:

I think we could be so strong but we're just bad mind. That boy would hate to see me like this if I was in a position and I would hate to see a next man above me. It's a bad mind chain, you get me. We always just wanna see everyone down and out. Don't wanna see each other rise – that's black people. Every single one of them has got a bad mind streak.

Again, a negative representation of black people is given; however, despite these negative views, Steve does not write off black people completely and recognizes that there are some 'kind-hearted' black people who do not act in the ways he described above.

Many interviewees make the assertion that black people are viewed negatively in society. The young offenders are also aware that young black males are stereotyped as robbers and criminals in society:

Black people are aggressive and are known to be aggressive, so when we want to take something we won't be sly about it, we'll do it upfront and so it's robbery.

(Steve)

Crime gets related to black people and it shouldn't be pointed at us. If someone's being robbed or bag is being robbed, that someone is going to think 'it's a black person' and that's not always true.

(Robert)

Robert then elaborates further on how he has experienced the negative representation of black people held by others:

Even just me walking by myself if I'm walking on the road and a woman is holding her bag, she will pull it up on her shoulder like I gonna snatch her bag or something – like I'm a bag snatcher. And I'll say something like 'Do I look like a robber or something?' or whatever's on the top of my head, 'cos I don't like that, it's not nice.

There are other interviewees who have shared this experience and feel the need to respond and reject the negative representations.

It's a blow inside 'cos I don't do robberies, so for someone to clutch their purse as I walk past – when I've probably got more money than them in my pocket anyhow – I feel like it's an insult . . . but that's the image they've got of us There's nothing we can do, it's like everyone in society has already been brainwashed to believe a certain thing, so that's what they believe.

(Steve)

Negative stereotypes have emotional and psychological effect on the young people in this study, as the potential stigma from others raises questions of self-identity and self-worth.

Although Steve maintains that society has a negative view of black people, which he believes will not change, he retains a positive image of 'strong black people'. The current social structure is accepted, as this young person is unable to imagine a different social structure, which is a further example of how oppressed groups act to maintain the status hierarchy. Other young offenders gave some positive responses to their thoughts on black people. For example, when asked 'What are your views on black people?' one response was 'We're good' (Paul). However, when prompted to develop this comment further, Paul was unable to express what he meant or provide any depth to support his statement. Similarly, Leslie gave a positive response to black people: 'I love black people man . . . I'm happy to be black, I'm proud to be black, I really wouldn't want to be any other colour'. Again, when probed further, Leslie was unable to give more details as to why he was proud to be black, for example, what particular qualities black people possessed that made him proud to be black.

Only one interviewee was able to provide a full explanation of his positive view of black people:

Strong, independent – a black person is very independent. Take my mum, for instance, she is an independent woman, she don't rely on no one but herself; raised four children by herself and a dog. I think black people are independent and strong. We won't breakdown easy.

(Robert)

Interestingly, Tony maintains that he does not see people in terms of their colour: 'I don't really see someone as black, most of the time I just see someone as someone, like individual'.

Some of the young offenders saw music as an important part of their lives and all had clear opinions of the type of music they liked. All the interviewees cited either 'hip-hop' or 'garage' as their most preferred type of music. The lyrical content has meaning to Leslie and he has identified the ideas as applicable to his own life:

They give me the message like, if you wanna do something you can do it man. I look at it like they're showing me like you can be bad and still be making money, legit money at the same time You can still make your legit money, yeah, and like you can still sell crack at the same time.

Clearly, reference to making money by selling drugs and violence does not produce a positive message for this particular listener of hip-hop/garage music, who believes that these actions are acceptable. Other interviewees mentioned the possible influence that hip-hop/garage music may have on its listeners, but suggest that it depends on its interpretation.

Steve agrees that hip-hop/garage music does not generally send out a positive message:

It's a bad message still; it's a very bad message . . . They talk about bling, bling, bling, bling, and I can feel that tune, yeah, 'cos obviously I've got a bit of bling, bling so I'm like yeah cool that they're talking about it. But say a younger person now, yeah, he's hearing bling bling and he's thinking 'rah, I want that bling bling', you understand, and it changes his path. So they don't really send out a good message.

In his viewpoint, Steve believes that the message hip-hop/garage artists give out becomes negative because they are promoting the acquisition of money and jewellery, which younger people, who are impressionable, do not have access to. Steve continues to argue that the message that music gives out is not fully responsible for the offending behaviour of black youth:

But at the end of the day, our life's fucked up anyway. And I'm talking not just me; I'm talking about all the young youth coming up like black guys or Chinese guys or whatever You can't really blame the music, you understand, blame society – blame society for outcasting people.

Again, Steve refers back to the part played by society, the negative representations of ethnic minority people, especially black people, and the consequences of this.

Lack of resources

Throughout the interviews and group discussion, money was a topic that was frequently referred to. There is the sense of the young people holding on to what money they have:

I'm tight as well, you get me. Like if I've got money, yeah, I ain't giving it away. I ain't lending no one nothing, I don't care how much it is – it's mine.

(Kelvin)

Indeed Steve defined himself in terms of being 'broke' and describes possible consequences of not having money:

If your parents are well off that can change your path . . . if your parents ain't got no money or have a lack of finance, it's hard for you to blend in the community. You can blend in the community 'cos you've grown up there – but obviously as a kid you are watching other people, it's a standard thing, you watch da next man and you're thinking 'I like that', you get me, but I can't get that. So it pushes you over the edge, even if you are going to school still it's always in the corner of your mind . . . like, how long can I do this for? It's the money.

Steve continues with his reasoning on why money is an important issue to young black males:

Catch the system though, why are all black boys thieves? Why do we all wanna rob for money? Cos we ain't got shit and we all wanna have shit; he wants the Rolex, the car, etc. We're all in this rat race.

Steve does concede, however, that the lack of money does not automatically result in all black people turning to crime: 'Obviously, there are the smarter ones that say 'If I want that then I'll get it in my own time, so he kicks back and he succeeds in life'. But for his own personal progression in life, Steve feels that he would need to 'resort to crime' to give himself a 'kick-start' in being successful in life.

The interviewees unanimously agreed that there were 'not enough' (Leslie) activities for young people in their community. When asked what would help to improve young people's facilities within the communities, suggestions were made:

More youth clubs where you are able to learn about yourself, as well as the active side.

(Tony)

The issue of self-identity is again raised as Tony suggests that young people should be given the opportunity for self-development within the youth centre environment. Robert goes on to suggest what resources are needed for young people:

I'd put like more youth centres or arcades, some form of activities that the children could do. Places that you can go and chill out Also, I'd put more libraries, even though I don't like going library, there is only one library and that's all the way at the top of the High Road.

Kevin provides an insight into what it is like for youth in the community and what happens when there is little for young people to do with their time:

People like my age; we ain't got nothing to do. All we do is go to college and come back . . . when there ain't no youth centres people are just on road, like doing nothing. That's when you're outcasted. From when you're in a group you're an outcast, you get what I'm saying. People say, look at dem, why are they standing on road, why are they standing about doing nothing?

Kelvin refers to the negative classification by the general public and how black youth are viewed in society.

Construction of self-identity

Some of the interviewees were able to define their ethnic background as being, for example, 'Caribbean' (Tony and Michael). Robert's response to this question provides a more complex answer reflecting the possible dilemmas faced by second generation black children in this country:

What is my ethnic background? I dunno really 'cos I keep changing it. My mum's Black Caribbean, but I am a Black British so I don't really know I was born in London, England but my background is from Caribbean.

In this instance, racial identity appears to be a confusing concept. The interviewee seems torn between defining himself in terms of his culture and background which originates from the Caribbean and defining himself in terms of a black person born in Britain. This sense of always viewing oneself through the eyes of others is classic dual consciousness:

The difficulty and complexity posed by an 'alter' self at odds with and sometimes fighting the 'other' self.

(Du Bois, 1899/1996)

There are signs of resentment at the fact that black people have to 'categorize' themselves and Steve believes that this is another form of discrimination against black people. Steve chooses to define his ethnic background as 'Rastafarian' or 'Nubian'. In fact, the question of defining their ethnic background proved to be a problem for some of the interviewees. During his individual interview, when asked to define himself, Leslie replied that he was Caribbean. However, when the same question was posed again in the group discussion, his response changed to 'British' (Leslie). This implies that either he defines himself as both Caribbean and British depending on the situation, or he is unsure of how to define himself and so he fluctuates between the two. Two of the young offenders seemed unable to describe their ethnic background and gave the response, 'What do you mean?' (Kelvin and Paul).

Despite the uncertainty in defining what their ethnic background was, all the young offenders acknowledged that their ethnic background had various influences on their life: 'Like food . . . and things like carnival' (Tony). In addition to food, there was also the appreciation that their ethnic background dictated how they would act as a person and 'The stuff I eat, the way I talk, the type of stuff that I know, what kind of wisdom I'll have and everything' (Steve). This illustrated another example of how they use elements of their ethnic background to construct their identity.

The interviewees were all able to describe the different ways in which they would 'stay focused' (Leslie) and achieve something that they wanted. Furthermore, elements of ambition were apparent in some of the statements made by the young offenders as to what they want to do in the future:

I wanted to be a computer engineer or something like that, I would take steps what would accomplish them, you know what I'm saying. Take it step-by-step man . . . I just wanna get my degree; get a little degree in computers and that and start looking for a job from them.

(Kelvin)

Another young offender, Leslie, explained that his goal was to just 'keep doing the music'; he was also confident that other people believed in him: 'Yeah, some people say that I'm soon ready to take it to the next level'.

In most instances, the interviewees asserted that they felt respected to some extent. Paul seemed to be unsure of himself, stating that 'some people' respected him. He justified this explaining that, 'You can just tell by the way people act sometimes' (Paul). In fact, respect appeared to be important to most of the young offenders: 'I don't get treated with no type of disrespect. Whether they respect me or not, I'm not getting treated with no disrespect, as far as I'm concerned, they respect me . . . they may not like me but they respect me' (Steve). Similarly, Robert suggests that he 'earns respect' in his own way; however, his methods appear to have earned him a negative reputation in the process: 'I earn respect. That's why they call me a bully'.

When investigating the personal characteristics that made up their identity, many of the young offenders didn't know how their friends would describe them. Nonetheless, a few of their descriptions of themselves contained positive characteristics, such as Michael's: 'I'm honest, I'm a nice person and I'm also sensitive'. Generally, the young offenders conveyed mixed impressions of how they perceived themselves and what they believed their friends thought about them:

Some would say I'm a bully 'cos I don't listen to no one, no one couldn't really tell me what to do . . . I don't think I'm a bully. I'm sort of a funny guy; I'm one of the jokers.

(Robert)

I'm a happy-go-lucky guy. I've got my bad side, my temper, but otherwise I'm cool. You can get along with me I'm sociable sometimes.

(Steve)

There is acknowledgement that as well as a positive side Steve also has a negative side, which he is aware of. Similarly, despite Kelvin's positive description of himself he still maintains the idea that he is 'bad' as a result of his previous behaviour:

I would describe myself like I'm smart; I'm the smartest one out of my friends . . . I'm bad, you get me. I've been there, done that . . . not no more man People used to hate me, like people never use to let their kids walk on the same side of the road as me and that, you know dem ones. People most use to think of me as a bad boy – naughty, you get me.

Kelvin's use of the present tense 'I'm bad', suggests that although this is a description of his past behaviour, he continues to identify with this negative image of himself.

The young offenders were asked if they had any role models and the general response was, 'Not really' (Paul, Tony and Michael). Robert gave this question some consideration and gave reasons for his answer:

No . . . my brother's bad, so he's not a role model, 'cos he's in prison . . . my mum's not a role model, my mum couldn't be a role model 'cos she's a woman. My own role model is myself. I don't even think I need one. I think that role models just get you in trouble. You should lead your own way, your own path, your own life. Do it the way you choose to do it. Other people might see things differently or do things differently . . . you should be your own person; you shouldn't want to role model someone else. God wants you to be your own person.

Robert's previous description of his mother suggests that he perceived her as having positive qualities as a black person; however, he reasoned that he is unable to view his mother as his role model because she is a woman. Kelvin wants to set 'A good example' to his unborn child:

I got a baby on the way man, come on now, I can't be getting nicked man. I want to see my baby grow and dem tings there, I don't want the baby turning out like me being without a dad and that.

Steve was the only young offender who identified himself as having a role model:

My mate . . . to tell you the truth it sounds strange but my role model is my mate. He's done well for himself at a young age, at 19. I'm 17, 18 next month and I am doing well.

A role model can be a positive or a negative, depending on what qualities are being modelled. Steve does not give any examples of what his friend has achieved and how he achieved things at a young age; therefore, it is inconclusive as to whether the role model will have a positive or negative effect on Steve's life and the way he perceives himself. However, Steve gives a further insight as to how he perceives himself:

Role models, if they have a positive impact, then yeah, they are important I couldn't be a role model 'cos I'm a bad person. I've been made to believe that I'm a bad person by the world innit.

This perception of himself as being a bad person is delivered in a somewhat sarcastic manner; in that Steve is prepared to live up to the label attached to him as a young black man in society.

Discussion

In the study, it appears that those young people who had no knowledge of black history found it more challenging to define their ethnic background and tended to hold more

negative representations of black people. The young black male offenders in the study lack the stability of knowing who they are and how such knowledge is incorporated in their self-identity. One interviewee was inclined to think that those black people who lacked knowledge of black history were more prone to commit crime and be influenced by the glamorization of material goods depicted by hip-hop music.

Some young people in the study were able to define their ethnic backgrounds whilst revealing the complexities they faced when defining their self-identity in terms of ethnicity. Tajfel and Turner (1986) suggest that those who showed inability to identify their ethnic or racial identity may be illustrating their rejection of the minority group in an attempt to attain the money, status and opportunities that the majority group possesses. This supports the notion that, for some individuals, conflict from this process may arise manifesting in criminal behaviour. According to social identity theory, a person's identity is formed and shaped by a number of direct and indirect experiences.

The interviewees were aware of the negative representations society holds of black people, thus it becomes difficult (but not impossible) to retain a positive social identity. It is imperative, therefore, not to allow such young people to internalize these negative representations, e.g. young black men commit robberies. Furthermore, work should be focused on changing society's perception of young black men; from the media through to institutions such as schools, the police and the courts. However, the young black male offenders appeared to have high collective self-esteem, which protects them from institutionally and externally imposed stigma. This is a protective factor, which should be nurtured and developed so that they can reach their full potential.

The interviewees were also aware of the negative images portrayed by hip-hop music in terms of the acquisition of material goods, selling drugs and violence. If these negative images are incorporated into the personal identity of individuals, then offending behaviour may be a product. It was also highlighted that there were insufficient resources within the community for young people, which led to further stereotyping of young black males who spend time on the streets in groups. This representation of 'gang culture' may be used by young black people to define themselves.

The young people were also aware of the discrimination of the police towards black people, which left them feeling victimized and disempowered to change the situation. However, with regards to legal representation, the majority of interviewees felt that their solicitors represented them in a fair and just way, with no perceived discrimination. This supports findings in other studies which suggest that black people's attitudes towards the courts and lawyers are fairly positive (Shute et al., 2005). Consequently, the young people were unaware of the discrimination that they face at every level of the Youth Justice System (Feilzer and Hood, 2004).

There is evidence to suggest that many of the interviewees fell within the pre-encounter stage (Cross, 1971) in that they internalized negative racial stereotypes and anti-black issues, which devalue their racial identity. The justification by one black young male that robbery occurs because black people possess the 'aggressive trait' reveals that distorted forms of racial identity may be a factor of offending behaviour. The young black male offenders demonstrated conflicts about racial identity in defining ethnic background and their own representations of black people. One interviewee,

however, appeared to have progressed to the immersion–emersion (third) stage of black identity whereby he has immersed himself into total blackness. He has attached himself to black culture, exhibits anti-white attitudes and is vicious in attacks on aspects of his old self that appears in others. Little suggests that most of the young people in this study have progressed to the final stages of racial identity as proposed by Cross (1971), whereby they have the ability to avoid negative outcomes such as criminal behaviour having developed coping strategies to deflect the negative impact of discrimination.

The results in this study are consistent with previous findings that ethnic minority groups are more likely to have a lower socio-economic status (Phillips and Bowling, 2003). The interviewees convey their frustration at the lack of both financial and community resources, which supports the resource accessibility model that higher criminality in these groups is in response to negative economic and social conditions. Most of the young black offenders did not have a role model they could relate to, which could impact on their identity formation and possibly limit their ability to reach their full potential. Creating a forum, for example youth clubs, in which these young black males have access to positive black (preferably male) role models would assist in the reversal of the negative representations that they held regarding black people as a whole.

Limitations of the study

In light of the small sample size of the study, a certain amount of caution should be applied to the extent to which these findings can be generalized to black male young offenders as a whole. Future research would benefit from a larger sample size and could also be supported with quantitative methods, such as incorporating a racial identity attitude scale to measure individual levels of racial identity. A further extension of the study would be to include young black male non-offenders in the sample so a comparison between the two groups could be made. The study was focused on the subjective view of interviewees on certain issues. Any underlying elements of their racial identity may only be seen in their natural environments with their family and friends. Therefore, field observations of the interviewees might reveal a different picture of the verbal account.

Implications for research and practice

The interviews provide a rich discussion of how some young black people in London might see their own identity. The importance of the study lies in the fact that the voices of young people and particularly minority young people are so often absent from youth justice discourse. In examining the role of racial identity with regard to the offending behaviour of black youth, the extent to which it is incorporated in individuals' sense of identity is variable. A more multidimensional approach to understanding minorities' experiences of victimization, offending and criminal justice processing is necessary (Phillips and Bowling, 2003).

Indeed, a closer look is needed at the complexity of racial identity of black people in Britain and research should seek to develop existing models of racial identity. The limited amount of literature on this subject emphasizes the need for further research especially in the UK. There is no evidence of causal links between racial identity and offending behaviour. However, the neglect of black history, negative representations of

black people, uncertainty around ethnic background, hip-hop culture and financial resources both in combination and isolation can influence racial identity and offending behaviour. The social context should not be ignored as the social relationships and institutional cultures around the young person can help or hinder the construction of self-identity.

Overall, the research upon which this article is based highlights the importance of assessing racial identity in order to understand the possible identity confusion of young black males in the criminal justice system. The Children Act 1989 (section 22(5)) specifies that workers should have regard to the racial, religious, cultural and linguistic needs of children. Youth Offending Team workers, therefore, need to recognize inter-racial differences in racial identity and their implications for practice, especially with one-to-one supervision sessions. For example, black young offenders who are in the immersion-emersion stage tend to denigrate white people and white culture, exhibiting generally anti-white attitudes. It could prove difficult for white caseworkers to engage and carry out effective interventions and they may find themselves verbally and emotionally under attack. Whereas, by the internalization stage the race of the caseworker becomes less important, black young offenders may still favour a black caseworker but will still also be accepting of white caseworkers providing they understand, recognize and respect their world views (Robinson, 1995).

In order to address the lack of knowledge regarding black history possessed by the young black offenders, intervention should encourage the acquisition of cultural background by providing information as part of a black self-development group. The young black offenders should also be encouraged to increase their awareness of positive black role models within society. This type of intervention would seek to reinforce the positive contributions that black people make in society and counteract the negative representations that are held by the young black offenders. Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been employed in a variety of contexts in the US, such as in education and in courts where socialized and institutionalized oppression of racial minorities has occurred. CRT aims to address the racial injustices of the past – so as not to maintain the status quo. It would appear that stakeholders within the Youth Justice System in the UK and elsewhere could benefit from drawing on CRT methods to inform policy in relation to black young offenders.

By assessing racial identity attitudes of the group members, a black self-development group can also be used to move the young people through the stages of racial identity to achieve internalization. An offending behaviour programme should also be designed to assist young black males to develop the necessary coping strategies not to maintain criminal behaviour and thereby reduce re-offending. With the negative images of hip-hop music and the lack of positive role models that seem to be prevalent among young black male offenders, it is important for black youth to improve their social identity and alter the way they conduct themselves with regards to criminal behaviour.

Agencies within the criminal justice system that supervise and aim to rehabilitate young black male offenders should consider developing policies that support the use of racial identity attitude assessments. This would acknowledge racial diversity of the black population and seek to enhance effective practice principles by fully assessing individual needs. It is, however, important to acknowledge that it is not acceptable for

young black males to just ‘cope’ with oppression and negative representations. Resources, time and focus should also be dedicated to changing these oppressive systems. Whilst this study only examined black male offenders, there are similar implications for practice and policy development with regards to other ethnic minority groups. Youth Offending Teams should, therefore, develop policies that are flexible and responsive to individual’s needs, including their racial identity.

Note

- 1 The author is writing in a personal capacity and the article does not necessarily represent the views of Lewisham Youth Offending Team.

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