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Some Reflections on Researching with Young Black People and the Youth Justice System

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Abstract

This article explores some of the methodological, ethical and practical difficulties of researching with young black people and is based on a three-year long research project that was a collaboration between The Children’s Society (a major NGO in England) and the University of Central England in Birmingham. The article uses findings from this research project to examine some broader epistemological issues related to ethnography, research more generally, and young black people’s dealings with the youth and criminal justice systems.

Keywords: black people, childhood, ethnography, race, racism, youth

Introduction

The choice of whether to examine crime from the point of view of the offender, victim, potential victim or controllers, for example, is never innocent of consequences.

(Nelken, 1994: 22)

This article offers a series of reflections about a variety of issues, dilemmas and opportunities that arose when conducting ethnographic research with young black people, and their relationship to the youth and criminal justice systems. These reflections are based on empirical work that was carried out with young black people over a period of three years, and which has been reported on elsewhere (see, in particular, Wilson and Moore, 2003; Wilson, 2003; Wilson, 2004; Sharp, 2005; Hill, forthcoming). Where it helps the reader who might not be familiar with this research – a collaboration between The Children’s Society (a major NGO in England) and the Centre for Criminal Justice Policy and Research at the University of Central England in Birmingham (UCE) – some general research findings are re-presented here, although this article is primarily concerned with the broader, epistemological underpinnings that
shaped and then guided the research. The research programme had four main elements – a major ‘tracking study’ based in Bristol in the south of England, and three shorter research projects with young black people in custody; their relations with the police in the community; and how they coped after being released from an institution.

In examining the broader, epistemological concerns and how they were resolved (or otherwise), the article seeks to achieve two objectives. Firstly, in the spirit of sharing experiences, it hopes to encourage others to engage in research with children generally, and black children in particular. Secondly, through explaining what was learned more generically through the course of the research, it further hopes to reveal how this has improved our knowledge about how young black people respond to the various pressures placed on them through their dealings with the youth justice system. Indeed, the research programme was specifically constructed to listen to, and to take account of, young black people’s life stories and experiences and by doing so gain deeper understanding. Thus, it is also possible to read this article as an extended plea on behalf of ethnography as a research strategy, and the various difficulties that are encountered and have to be overcome when such a strategy is adopted.

However, all that having been said, the intention here is not to engage in the various and increasingly lively debates about ethnography, or to trace the recent interest in ethnography – partly prompted by the growing importance of cultural criminology (see Ferrell and Sanders, 1995; Ferrell et al., 2004), but rather to reveal how ethnography helped to shape and develop this particular research programme, at a time when criminology seems in danger of being swamped by administrative evaluations of various kinds. Of course, it is only fair to acknowledge that all of this was aided by the fact that the research was being funded by a NGO, rather than by a government agency. Even so, it should also be noted that the research set out to challenge the perceptions of the statutory and voluntary agencies working with this client group, and as a consequence contribute to better practice.

Thus, as can be seen immediately, and as Nelken (1994) has drawn attention to, this research programme was never going to be ‘innocent of consequences’. In short, it sought out a specific group of young people, and endeavoured to give those young people ‘a voice’ about the youth justice system, in the wake of the Macpherson Inquiry into the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence (Macpherson, 1999). Moreover it did so at a time when ‘childhood’ was being ‘reconstructed’ (James and Prout, 1990), and young people more generally were being ‘turned into the human equivalent of dangerous dogs’ (Wilson and Ashton, 1998). Indeed Rose (1989: 121) has described how childhood has become the most ‘intensively governed sector of personal existence’. The research was, therefore, never going to be ‘passive or neutral’, to use Paul Rock’s (2001: 30) phrase, but rather interactive and creative, selective and interpretive. Along the way some 140 young black people – both boys and girls – were interviewed, in various locations in England and Wales, and in different institutional settings to try to understand how they responded to regulation, surveillance and ‘reconstruction’. Unsurprisingly, methodological, ethical and practical issues informed, shaped, and at times frustrated the research programme at every stage, and several examples of this are described in detail below. However, and perhaps providing a linkage, there were two immediate questions that had to be faced.
Some Immediate Dilemmas

First, given the desire to give this group of young people a ‘voice’, to what extent could they actually ‘speak for themselves’? After all, whilst extensive use of their voices has been used throughout the published reports, through verbatim quotes and ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973), these voices have then been analysed, contextualized and theorized by adult, and largely white researchers. In these circumstances how then have those who participated in the research actually been given a ‘voice’, and, more crucially, is the ‘voice’ that they have been given loud enough? If not, can this be justified, or is this merely another example of what Lather (2001: 482) has recently described as the ‘romance of empowerment that drives much current ethnography’?

Second, there was a fear that the researchers could have been accused (and indeed might still be accused), of bias and relativism. This might not only antagonize potential readers of the research, but could also serve to undermine the force of the arguments and conclusions that were advanced. All of this brings to the foreground the issue of standpoint, although this in itself is nothing new. After all, criminologists have long had to deal with the question of deciding which ‘side they are on’, especially as they work in a subject area that often labels ‘outsiders’ (Becker, 1967). However, all of this became even more complicated as this specific research programme hoped to influence practice, and this in itself can be problematic. For whilst criminological theorizing has often been wedded to practical considerations, theorizing’s freedom from practical constraints is also what gives it ‘its potential to undermine official claims and legitimations about crime and its control’ (Nelken, 1994: 27; see also Cohen, 1990). In short, how can theorizing that is free from practice, and which thus has the potential to challenge received wisdom and policy, also be used to guide practice?

For some (see, for example, Young, 1992) the key to unlocking this conundrum has been to deny that it is possible to separate theory from practice. The research programme did not follow this logic, and instead attempted to fashion a solution based on resolutely listening to, and documenting what it was that the young black people actually said. As such they prompted, guided, and – to use an ethnographically loaded description – grounded our theorizing (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Corbin and Strauss, 1998; Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001), and in doing so, by allowing the researcher to see the world through their eyes, it is argued that the research has been able to generate a fresh perspective on youth justice policy and practice. This also helps to explain the use of creative and dynamic metaphors as titles for the research reports (but which are nonetheless rooted in what young people said) such as ‘acting strangely,’ ‘a lack of trust and confidence’, ‘playing the game’ and ‘dreaming out of despair’. Of course, this brings us back to the first question that was posed about the extent to which their ‘voice’ has been used. Here, in attempting to find a solution, Pat Carlen’s (1983, 1985) observation (from her research with female prisoners) that there is a necessary limit as to how far the subjects of research can be made to ‘speak for themselves’ guided the research. After all, those who are conducting the research have to accept their responsibilities too in co-producing, rather than simply discovering the world of their research. These responsibilities also included resolving the many methodological, ethical and practical difficulties that have been alluded to, and to which I now turn.
Ethnography

The ethnographic tradition within criminology has a venerable history (Brewer, 2000; Noaks and Wincup, 2004), although there is a continuing debate about what ethnography actually is – a debate not eased by Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1995: 2) observation that the boundaries around ethnography are ‘necessarily unclear’. However, broadly speaking ethnography involves the study of people in their natural setting, typically resulting in the researcher being present for extended periods of time in order to collect data systematically about daily activities, and the meanings that are attached to them. Thus, ethnography is not – in the purest sense – a research method (a data collection technique), or a methodology (a philosophical framework). Rather, to paraphrase Lesley Noaks and Emma Wincup (2004), it is a research strategy that is inextricably linked to two forms of data collection – participant observation and in-depth interviews. It is also closely linked to the methodological stance of naturalism, although of late a postmodern critique (see, for example, Denzin, 1997) has rather undermined that linkage. So too the issue of how far our research participants could ‘speak for themselves’ (related to the belief that ethnography ‘tells it like it is’) has already been touched upon, and the responsibilities that researchers on the programme shared in creating, rather than simply reporting the world in which we immersed ourselves. Nonetheless, throughout the research programme an attempt was made to present a ‘realist text’; what Brewer (2000: 138) has described as ‘thick description and extensive verbatim quotation’. This is disputed territory, but aware of these disputes I ultimately described my own work as a form of ‘post postmodern ethnography, which is both systematic and rigorous and uses an authoritative voice in telling its story’ (Wilson, 2004: 320).

It is also worth acknowledging that the belief that ethnography ‘tells it like it is’, is but one of the many myths that the ‘unclear’ boundaries, or ‘messy business’ (see, for example, Pearson, 1993: vii) of this research strategy has acquired. To this, other critique could be added. For example, it could be argued that ethnography is seen by some as easy to do, or, by others, as lacking academic rigour. Only those who have never conducted ethnographic research could imagine that it is easy to do – an issue discussed more fully below when the practical problems that emerged during the course of the research are considered. So, too, the idea that ethnography lacks academic rigour is worth dwelling on, especially as more positivistic researchers – used to control groups and research that can be ‘replicated’ – will be suspicious of the results. However, here the defence takes the form of outlining the part that ethnography has played in developing an understanding of childhood and children, which is also relevant to issues that emerged during the research process.

Allison James (2001: 246), for example, has argued that ethnographic research has ‘enabled children to be recognised as people who can be studied in their own right within the social sciences,’ and has gone as far as to claim that ethnography is the ‘new orthodoxy in childhood research’. James’s argument is based on the reality that ethnography permits children to be seen as competent interpreters of their world, which in turn involves a shift from seeing children as the raw and unininitiated recruits of society, to seeing them as making a contribution to society. As such, researchers too
have to change their perspective, and instead of thinking that they are working ‘on’ children, have now to think of themselves as working ‘with’ children. Ethnography thus allows children to be seen as competent informants about, and interpreters of, their own lives, and the lives of others. Thus ethnographic research with children has moved out of the school into other settings, such as the hospital (Alderson, 1993), the club (James, 1986), and the community (Baker, 1998), and has been used to explore other aspects of children’s lives such as health and sickness (Christensen, 1999), play (Thorne, 1993) and the assumption of gendered and ethnic identities during childhood (Connolly, 1998). This was clearly of relevance to this research programme, which aimed to understand how black children and young people interpreted their own world and their contact with the adult world of youth justice, and how they reacted and responded as a consequence (see Hall et al., 1978 for an earlier discussion). However, as Rock has pointed out, ‘the white, middle class, middle aged male sociologist would have difficulty in finding acceptance in any number of worlds’ (Rock, 2001: 34). How then were we able to gain access to the young people that we wanted to work with?

**Practical Problems Everywhere**

Gaining access to institutions is never easy and difficulties of access were a recurring and time-consuming problem which delayed the research programme at several stages. In essence these difficulties took two forms: gaining access to institutions; and thereafter gaining access to the young people themselves. In relation to the former, for example, the first of the shorter research projects involved negotiating access to young black men in Young Offenders Institutions, and this involved protracted, and at times farcical, negotiations with HM Prison Service. For example, given that the research was ethnographic it was impossible to complete the Prison Service’s prescriptive research pro forma and access to one institution was accordingly denied. So too we were ‘encouraged’ to allow the Prison Service’s Race Advisory Consultant to join the Advisory Group that oversaw the research programme. However, even after all these hurdles had been cleared, the number of days that were allowed to conduct field research at one establishment was cut to just two, which hardly allowed for ‘immersion’ in the field.

Staff working with young black people in both statutory and voluntary organisations, and who often therefore formally act as ‘gatekeepers’ also frustrated the research process. One particular problem, for example, centred on the issue of payment. Several staff working with the young people that we wished to interview felt that they should be paid for agreeing to take part in the research programme. After much discussion – particularly on the Advisory Group – and for various reasons, this was not something that we felt that we wanted to do, although we repeated our willingness to pay for out-of-pocket travel and food expenses. Nonetheless, it was clear that in raising the issue these gatekeepers had created an expectation that the research participants should be paid, and our unwillingness to do so undoubtedly contributed to creating a climate in which some potential research participants chose not to participate.

Here it should also be acknowledged that, with the exception of one researcher, everyone conducting fieldwork was white. More than this, three also had direct...
experience of working in the criminal justice system – one as a Prison Governor, another as a senior Police Officer and the third as a Probation Officer. The danger here is that we might have been seen – as Kate McCoy (1998) noted with regard to her ethnographic research with drug abusers – as ‘doing spy work’. Indeed she went as far as to suggest that, in spite of the researchers’ good intentions, ‘all research is to some degree surveillance’ (McCoy, 1998: 6). We have no way of determining if either this racial, or professional background might have deterred potential research participants from coming forward. However, it is also worth reflecting that when access to the young people was gained, these professional backgrounds were often a source of great interest, with several of the interviewees asking for advice in relation to particular problems or incidents.

Nonetheless, these practical problems that have been described had to be overcome, and a variety of strategies were used to do so. Three in particular were employed. First, we tapped into existing networks from our own professional backgrounds, where this was appropriate, and any other networks that we could be introduced to through, most immediately, The Children’s Society, The Howard League for Penal Reform and graduate students at The University of Central England. Second, where it was possible, other black staff at the University ‘vouched’ for the good intentions of the programme, and this had the effect of ‘badgeing’ our work as acceptable. Third, the well-established technique of ‘snowballing’ was used, so that after research had been conducted with one particular individual or group they were then asked to recommend another individual or group that they thought would be prepared to participate.

All this having been said, and whilst a significant number of young black people were eventually interviewed, the difficulties that were experienced of gaining access has to be one of the most significant aspects of the research programme. As such, it is important to consider why this should be so, especially as these difficulties were viewed by the researchers as more profound than they had experienced previously, even when they had been researching with ‘hard to reach’ groups. Two issues are perhaps worthy of consideration.

First, it is quite clear that research with young people generally is fraught with difficulties. To this extent, for example, all of the researchers had to have police clearance – as required by the Children Acts of 1989 and 2004 – before they were able to begin the research. This in itself was time consuming. However, of note, not one of the researchers was ever asked to produce the certificate of clearance, which rather undermined the process that the researchers had gone through. Added to this general difficulty there was the added difficulty that came with giving a group of black children a voice – an issue that was felt, in particular, to have had an impact with the custody research project. Indeed in the Young Offenders Institutions that were visited there was a fear that those who participated would be ‘off message’; that, in short, they would provide an insight that challenged the prevailing New Public Management culture of key performance targets and indicators that were being ‘met’ and ‘achieved’ (for a fuller discussion see below and Wilson, 2004).

Second, it also became clear that young black people have become used to requests for interviews from researchers, and that they have not necessarily found it in their interests to participate. This issue became particularly marked during the second shorter
research project about policing, when it was obvious that some of the interviewees felt that ‘nothing was going to change’. Here, it seemed that the failure that was being articulated was not concerned with organizations and agencies of the youth and criminal justice systems, but rather with the failings of academic research. After all, a whole library of research about the counter-productivity of imprisonment – in an age of ‘evidence led policy’ – has not reduced the prison population (see, most recently, Goldson and Coles, 2005; Wilson, 2005). Nor has our knowledge of the ‘multiplier effect’ of racism in the criminal justice system, from institutional racism in operational policing, through the process of prosecution, remand or bail, and sentencing decisions markedly altered the circumstances of black people when they come into contact with the criminal justice system (Home Office, 1992; Hood, 1992; Graham and Bowling, 1995; Penal Affairs Consortium, 1996; Home Office, 1997; Goldson and Chigwada-Bailey, 1999; Bowling and Phillips, 2002). Thus what seemed to be articulated was a pessimism about the academy, and the impact that academic research could have on practice. Here too, for example, a common criticism from many of the gatekeepers was ‘we know all of this already’, ‘this has been done before’ and ‘nothing will change’. Without doubt these sentiments also had an impact on the young people that participated. Of course it is too early to answer these charges in relation to this research programme, but as a general rule keeping the young people that participated informed about the course of research, and especially any publicity that it might have generated, was one way of overcoming this pessimism, at least in the short term.

An Ethical Dimension

The research programme was specifically mindful of ethical questions beyond the need to conform with the provisions of legislation, such as the Children Acts (1989, 2004), the Data Protection Act (1998) and The Human Rights Act (1998). Ethnographic research brings with it distinctive ethical challenges (see, for example, Noaks and Wincup, 2004: 37–52). Throughout the research, the claim by Jupp et al. (2001: 171) that ‘ethics is about the standards to be adopted towards others in carrying out research’ was helpful. Ethical considerations guided each stage of the research programme, from design to dissemination. It is also worth noting that the original research proposal was vetted by The Children’s Society and the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences of the University of Central England. However, as ethnographic research is a creative, open-ended and often dynamic process, there were issues that had to be faced as they were encountered, and this inevitably resulted in the researcher exercising discretion. As such, each of the shorter research projects and the tracking study had their own ethical problems to face and overcome, but throughout all were guided by three considerations: individual rights; ‘informed consent’; and confidentiality.

Each of these considerations is important, but the issue of informed consent, by which is meant that the research was conducted in such a way that those who were participating had a complete understanding at all times of what the research was about, presented particular challenges. For example, how could this be done with children, some of who were in institutions (see also Goldson, 2002), and many more of whom...
were relatively powerless in relation to those conducting the research? We took the view that informed consent requires voluntary participation (see Shaw, 2003), and which also helps to explain why those who agreed to be interviewed were not paid. This brought with it some difficulties in that, for example, each of the Young Offenders Institutions ‘chose’ those who were to be interviewed for the research. How then could their participation be described as voluntary? Practically, irrespective of the fact that they had been chosen, each participant was offered the opportunity to withdraw from the research. However, this was not a simple process, and so, for example, the researcher had to ensure that the potential interviewee was advised that they could withdraw, but crucially after the member of staff who had escorted that interviewee from his cell had left the interview room. (Indeed in one Young Offender Institution the researcher had to insist that there was no member of staff present when interviews were being conducted.) Again this was not a simple matter, for – if a potential interviewee wanted to withdraw – his refusal might have been interpreted negatively by the prison authorities – after all, they had ‘chosen’ him to be interviewed. Thus, in these circumstances, the researcher simply passed the time of day until a suitable period had elapsed, and the ‘non-interviewee’ could go on his way.

So too each interviewee was assured anonymity, and this also meant that some specific issues, situations or circumstances that had been described, and which potentially could have identified the interviewee, had to be generalized to maintain their anonymity. This inevitably placed limits on a desire to use their ‘voice’. Here it is also worth noting that a significant number of interviewees throughout the research programme did not want their conversations to be tape recorded at all, which resulted in the researcher taking contemporaneous notes, or hurriedly attempting to write everything down after the interview had ended. This resistance to being recorded on tape perhaps reflects negative experiences of being recorded in police stations, and other formal interview situations.

Was all of this, as Eisner (1991) suggests, ‘exploitative’? Clearly I would argue that it was not for at least two reasons. First, the research was specifically designed to provide a platform for young people in circumstances in which they are routinely denied ‘voice’. Indeed, there has been very little direct research exclusively with young black people in Young Offender Institutions beyond Elaine Genders and Elaine Player’s work in the mid-1980s (Genders and Player, 1989). Second, it is hoped that the research will contribute to a greater and deeper understanding of the issues faced by young black people in their dealings with the youth justice system, and thus contribute to better practice. It would be very hard to view this as exploitation, although perhaps this will also depend on whether or not practice actually changes. Here too it might be pertinent to comment on the dissemination of the research, which is primarily being undertaken by The Children’s Society, given their experience in influencing the public policy agenda. Too often this is seen as a ‘once and for all’ event, with one audience, yet our experience suggests that dissemination is a lengthy and complex process, and crucially it takes some time for research findings to seep into public, policy and academic consciousness, and that different strategies are required for each of these audiences.
The Question of Race

As has been described throughout this article the intention of the research was to give young black people a voice. However, the issue of race is a problematic one and raises all kinds of methodological and conceptual problems (see, for example, Pitts, 1993; Goldson and Chigwada-Bailey, 1999; Bowling and Phillips, 2002). After all, as with childhood and crime, race is a social construction, and in choosing to conduct research with young black people we might be accused of merely contributing to racial stereotypes rather than challenging them. This anxiety was particularly acute during the tracking study where the researcher worried that in seeking to give young ‘black’ people a voice he might simply be contributing to the very problem that the research set out to address.

These anxieties notwithstanding, the research had to also acknowledge a plethora of evidence that suggests that the experiences of black people in the criminal and youth justice systems are qualitatively different from those of white people, in several important respects. For example, black people are more likely to be stopped and searched, arrested and charged – rather than cautioned by the police; more likely to be prosecuted by the Crown Prosecution Service, and face harsher charges in court; more likely to be refused bail; less likely to be subject to a pre-sentence report; more likely to be sent to prison than made the subject of a community-based penalty; more likely to receive longer sentences (both custodial and non custodial); and more likely to be tried in the Crown Courts, rather than in a Magistrate’s Courts (Audit Commission, 1996; Fitzgerald, 1998; Goldson and Chigwada-Bailey, 1999; Runnymede Trust, 2000; Singh, 2000). Indeed, during the course of the research programme, the racist murder of Zahid Mubarek at HMYOI Feltham brought a sharp focus to the treatment of young black people in prison.

Faced with these issues how then were we to approach the issue of race, and what did we mean by ‘black’? Here the research programme was guided by The Children’s Society, and in particular by previous research that they had facilitated. Thus, for example, Beamont’s definition of ‘black’ was used, and his observation that ‘black’ has:

> An inclusive use (intended to be unifying) embracing any person likely to experience racism in British society because of their ‘non-white’ skin colour. This use would include all the main ‘non-white’ minority ethnic groupings within British society – people with African-Caribbean, Asian and Chinese heritage. It would also include most people of mixed heritage.

(Beanomt, 2000: 17)

And, at the End of it All?

In attempting to gain a deeper understanding of what young black people think about the youth justice system, and by employing a research strategy that saw them as competent interpreters of and contributors to society, what was discovered? Here, there is no intention to list what was presented in each of the shorter research projects or in the tracking study, but rather a desire to discuss the broader themes that emerged throughout the research programme. Chief amongst these was the reality that young black people have little trust or confidence in the youth or criminal justice systems, and
crucially, as a result, they are not passive and accepting, but rather strategize accordingly. As such, they ‘play the game’, by taking action themselves – or in concert with other young black people – when they need support or are in difficulties. In short, they do not look to the police, or other agents of the state for help, but to each other. In doing so they are both directly and indirectly rejecting the adult world of youth justice. By ‘directly’ we mean that they employ strategies to overcome, and share intelligence about issues that would normally be handled by the police, social workers, teachers, prison and probation officers. By ‘indirectly’ it is implied that such is this shared lack of trust and confidence that they often simply do not realize that the adult world would offer them support at all. For example, in the custody research programme, very few of the interviewees had actually heard of the various monitoring procedures about race, or the numerous ways that they could make a complaint. The very small number who had heard of these procedures described them as ‘not for us’.

This latter observation obviously raises the issue of who these procedures were actually for, if they were not for the young black people that they were supposed to be supporting, and the whole area of monitoring is the second broad theme to emerge from the research programme. For it became an absurd and recurring reality that every time we started to conduct research with one of the agencies of the youth justice system we would discover that their monitoring systems suggested that their ‘targets’, in relation to race, were being ‘met’ or ‘achieved’. Indeed various staff would often proudly and sincerely display mountains of monitoring forms that had been diligently, almost religiously completed, as if their very existence demonstrated that ‘everything was as it should be’. Of course the reality was much more complicated, and these forms seemed to be measuring a parallel universe to the one that was being researched. In short, it was a universe that in reality had little or nothing to do with the lives of young black people whether on the prison’s landings, in the streets, or at the probation office. As such, it doesn’t take much imagination to understand whom these monitoring forms were ‘for’, and the purpose that they served.

The third broad theme that emerged concerns the optimism of the young black people themselves – a finding especially apparent in the third research project that related to post custody (Hill, forthcoming). This is a finding that some people might find perverse, for we live in a time when the youth justice system is expanding both in terms of sentencing powers and system reach. As a result what it means to be young has become increasingly ‘tightly defined and regulated’ (Muncie and Hughes, 2002: 2). Indeed New Labour has been in the vanguard of this regulation, and whilst it is difficult to discern a fundamental philosophy underpinning the various initiatives that have taken place since 1997, one clear feature of the youth justice landscape has been ‘adulteration’, so that the gap between what it means to be a ‘child’ and an ‘adult’ has increasingly become blurred. Thus, for example, the ancient legal presumption of doli incapax was abolished for 10–14 year-olds in 2000, and Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), which can be applied to children as young as 10 – the age of criminal responsibility – were introduced by Section 1 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Allied to these, children – whether they have committed an offence or not – can now be subject to local curfews, and their parents to Parental Responsibility Orders if their children truant, are school excluded, or get into trouble with the police. Truly, in terms
of public policy, young people generally have become the ‘human equivalent of dangerous dogs’ (Wilson and Ashton, 1998), or subject to what Simon (2001) has termed a ‘penalty of cruelty’.

Nonetheless the young black people who participated were leading complex lives, and were often on the receiving end of systematic patterns of disadvantage, which were certainly not going to be resolved by New Labour’s appeals to morality and responsibilization (see Burney, 2005). Despite everything that they faced, the young black people that we interviewed were creative, resourceful, funny, welcoming, diligent, hard working, innovative, competent and charming. Perhaps if our public policy towards young people took the same starting point they would be offered support and care, rather than naming and shaming.

Of course, there is still more to discover and no research programme can ever see itself as truly ‘finished’. In particular, we would have liked to have investigated how the largely hidden, social networks of communication and support that young black people maintained developed as they grew older, and how they might be carried into the worlds of work, education or training. So, too, the roles of mentors with young black people would have been interesting to have investigated, as would the whole territory of desistance from offending. No doubt, these and other issues will become the subject of future research but, in the meantime, as far as it is possible to describe it as such, the current research programme is ‘finished’, and this research has to struggle to be turned into practice.

References


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