

Growing Up Bad?

the Tufnell Press,

London,
United Kingdom

www.tufnellpress.co.uk

email_contact@tufnellpress.co.uk

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

<i>paperback ISBN</i>	<i>1872767 036</i>
<i>ISBN-13</i>	<i>978-1-872767-03-1</i>

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Printed in England and U.S.A. by Lightning Source

Growing Up Bad?
Black Youth, 'Road' Culture and Badness
in an East London Neighbourhood

Anthony Gunter

Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	
<i>Researching black British youth</i>	ix
Chapter One	
<i>Regurgitating the cool (or threatening?) pose: The 'problem' with black British youth</i>	1
Chapter Two	
<i>Black East London: The nearest far away place</i>	15
Chapter Three	
<i>Researching young people: Reflections and dilemmas</i>	31
Chapter Four	
<i>Education, employment and training</i>	50
Chapter Five	
<i>Family and home life</i>	73
Chapter Six	
<i>Road culture I: Life on road</i>	93
Chapter Seven	
<i>Road culture II: Badness and rude boys in the neighbourhood</i>	117
Chapter Eight	
<i>A few last words</i>	141
Appendix	150
References	152

Acknowledgements

This has been a long, eventful but very rewarding journey which began some twenty odd years ago in a decaying post-industrial neighbourhood of Birmingham, when this 'disaffected' (at the time) young black male left school with one solitary CSE grade 1 in English. During the latter part of this journey (the PhD road via detached youth and community work) I was given invaluable support, encouragement and proverbial 'kicks up the arse' by my supervisor Kevin Stenson, and uncompromising advice by my second supervisor Paul Watt. A big thank you also goes to Hanif Barker who held the fort on many an occasion when this senior youth worker was 'doing ethnography'. Also I would like to thank Melanie Johnson for all those free counselling and support sessions during the period of this research, and Paul Leakey for his support and youth work tutelage. A 'shout out' to all the young people who participated in this study and to the youth work staff team at Manor Children and Young People's Resource Centre. Lastly, thanks to all my family and friends for their support, especially Heather and Mali who have had to endure many years of neglect and monotonous PhD and book talk; also a thank you is owed to our princess madame Aiyana who, along with her 'dollies', regularly kept me company (whether I wanted the company or not) by re organising my office as I attempted to finish off this book project.

Dedicated to Joycelyne Carmen McPherson.

Introduction

Researching black British 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 many indices of social alienation and discrimination, it is more than likely that young African-Caribbean males will head many of the lists that detail amongst other things: 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 their continued social marginalisation. Such arguments are bolstered by the plethora of reports that highlight amongst other things teacher racism in schools (particularly toward African Caribbean young men)¹ and the prevalence of institutionalised racist practices within the Crown Prosecution Service² that deny black (African Caribbean) male defendants equal treatment in court. Young black people are also 'known to be over-represented at every stage of the criminal justice system, including figures for youth offending and in the national prison population' (Greater London Authority, 2003: 3). 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). There have also been a number of empirical studies that have romanticised and championed black British youth subcultures, portraying them either as 'deviant' sites of resistance to institutionalised white racism³ or as the creative driving force behind contemporary popular youth cultures⁴.

Ironically, whilst approaching the issue from differing perspectives all the above discourses seemingly buy into populist news-media stereotypes that portray all young black men as belonging to a larger homogenous collective. From my own experiences as a youth work practitioner, I felt that the academy's pre-occupation with either the black youth problem and/or black youth subcultures, resulted in a theoretically narrow research focus overly concerned with the

1 See, Wright, 1985; Mac an Ghail, 1988; Gillborn and Gipps, 1996.

2 See report by Crown Prosecution Service, 2003.

3 See, Pryce, 1979; Cashmore, 1979; Cashmore and Troyna, 1982)

4 See, Hewitt, 1986; Gilroy, 1987a and 1993a; Hebdige, 1987; Jones, 1991.

'spectacular'. Such research down-played the mundane character of black young people's lives in favour of eye-catching activities such as rioting, 'mugging', gun and knife violence, school exclusions and educational under-achievement, music, and fashion. The black young people that I had worked with—whilst having a love of music, sports and fashion—were just as concerned with obtaining formal educational qualifications, a 'good paying' job, and their own home somewhere in suburbia. In short their aspirations were not too dissimilar from their white working-class peers. In addition 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. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of empirical research that attempts to holistically explore the complexities and differences within contemporary black British youth experience(s). Such studies that are rooted within local neighbourhood settings would provide a counterweight to the perpetual stereotyping of black male youth, either as the perennial criminal 'other' (Keith, 1993) or the 'darling of popular youth sub-culture' (Sewell, 1997: ix).

Youth, governance and social policy

The academy's interest in the black youth question was part of a much greater and longstanding tradition—undertaken by various governments and charitable and religious organisations—regarding the problematising of certain sections of the British youth population. Poor and working-class young people's position in British society, as well as their actions, attitudes and behaviour have traditionally attracted the attentions of philanthropists, policy makers—and those self appointed guardians of public morality and sobriety. Indeed, the very concept of youth is intimately linked to a plethora and 'history' of moral panics (Cohen, 1972), 'respectable fears' (Pearson, 1983) and stereotypes ranging from child pick pockets in Victorian England, right through to the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s with their itinerant football hooligans, black muggers, teenage Joy Riders and school girl mothers. The perennial youth question therefore becomes a 'metonym for all that that has gone wrong in society' (Roche and Tucker, 1997: 3) and further allows each generation an opportunity to wax and wane about the ill-effects of modernisation and affluence, which have led to the erosion of traditional values based around morality and duty to the family and wider community.

Some commentators (see Jeffs and Smith, 1987; Jeffs and Smith, 1988; Smith, 1988) perceive youth oriented social welfare policies—from the late nineteenth

century to the present day—as an attempt by the state to placate and nullify the potential threats posed by poor and working-class young people, and in so doing maintaining the existing social, political and economic order as envisaged by key members of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, the beginnings of the modern youth service came about through the passing of the 1870 Education Act and the gradual introduction of welfare legislation which transformed youth work into a ‘means of producing subjectivity. In return for an opportunity for some amusement, young people would have to submit themselves to improvement’ (Smith, 1988: 11). The recent history of the youth service suggests that it is a facility that both local and national governments have shamelessly and expediently used in order to be seen (by the media and the public) to be addressing the ‘latest’ moral panic of the day. Other commentators, who similarly view British social welfare policy from a neo-Marxist perspective, maintain that youth policy initiatives introduced in the 1970s and 1980s sought to minimise the potential for major civil unrest (Mungham, 1982) amidst record levels of youth unemployment. These policies also highlighted the desire (on the part of central government) to provide a better trained workforce (Williamson, 1993) through the introduction of various youth training schemes aimed specifically at working-class school leavers. Similar state interventions within such areas as housing, social security, youth justice and crime prevention have during the past thirty years or so (Coles, 1995) become even more concerned with discipline and regulation, as witnessed by the introduction of ever more authoritarian policies which have marginalised significant numbers of poor and vulnerable young people by ‘systematically removing their access to state assistance, public space and employment’ (Muncie, 2004: 208).

There are a number of academics that take issue with the structural determinist influenced arguments concerning the development of youth oriented British social welfare policy. Rather than viewing the state as a coherent and ruthless machine that consciously acts to maintain bourgeoisie capitalist hegemony over its docile masses, there is an opposing discourse which attempts to ‘better understand’ the complexities of youth policy both historically and presently, through the utilisation of the ‘broader notion of [governmentality] and the governmental strategy of sovereignty’ (Stenson and Factor, 1995: 176). This approach, which draws heavily upon the work of Foucault (1977), has enabled social scientists an insight into the way in which the numerous government agencies involved in social welfare are embroiled in the regulation of everyday social life. Instead of viewing power as state centred (which happens

to be over bearing and all encroaching), governmentality pushes the theme of the interrelated-ness of social structure, power, knowledge and government at a distance, whereby the state realises how individuals, wider civil society and markets 'have their own logics and densities, their own intrinsic mechanisms of self regulation' (Rose, 1993: 289).

Whereas neo-Marxist influenced writers argue that social welfare policies aimed at working-class young people are mainly concerned with preparing (or training) them for a life of poverty, disadvantage, dead end jobs, and the dole:

the strategies involved in the government of youth can be viewed as aspects of [governmentality]. This refers to the targeting of the population as an object of government at both the collective and individual levels, in order to foster health, wealth, economic efficiency and social stability.

(Stenson and Factor, 1995: 174)

Meanwhile sovereignty, through the use of disciplinary practices—such as police surveillance, stop and search, public curfews and other disciplinarian or repressive means of patrolling the borders of youth and other ascribed risk identities (Ericson and Haggerty, 1999)—and training, education and surveillance resolves to enable young people to gain new productive skills and a growing sense of citizenship which enable them to better adapt to the modern day expectations of the global capitalist economy (Rose and Miller, 1992; Donald, 1992). Consequently, instead of viewing governmentality as a specific technique Stenson and Factor, (1995: 174) argue that it:

constitutes a broad ethos or framework of government, within which discipline [the attempt to produce docile, well regulated individuals] and the sovereign control over territory ... are transformed, realigned and supplemented by new techniques. (see also, Stenson, 2000)

Stenson (1998 and 1999) further develops the notion of self-governance particularly in relation to the study of young people, and argues that it is important to recognise the interactions between formal and informal sites of governance. Within this perspective, young people's peer group networks, hang-out spots and wider subcultural influences become informal sites of self-governance, in contrast to public modes of government. It is necessary therefore to undertake ethnographic research with young people in order to

better understand the way in which they attempt to self-govern their own lives by resisting the official strategies and schemes of governments, policy makers and other statutory and voluntary organisations concerned with disaffected and marginalised youth.

Youth—Transitions and social exclusion

Coles (1995) identifies three main transition lines or ‘careers’—the school-to-work transition, domestic or family transition and lastly the housing transition—that young people must successfully pass through on their way from dependent status (childhood) through to independent status or adulthood. Each of the three ‘careers’ are interrelated and interdependent on each other. Furthermore they contain ‘structures of opportunities for young people’ which are themselves ‘determined by social and economic conditions’ (Coles, 1995: 10) as well as by government policy. During the post Second World War boom years characterised by full employment, the school-to-work transition was seemingly secure and straightforward, with the majority of young people leaving school and obtaining paid employment. As wage earners these young people were also much more likely to make further successful domestic and housing career choices, taking advantage of the prevailing opportunity structures and leaving the familial home of origin to start their own family and/or live independently. By the mid 1970s, however, the social and economic position of many young people within society had become decidedly more perilous due to a world wide economic recession coupled with a restructuring of the labour market. The Conservative Government’s social security reforms in the mid-1980s, further compounded young people’s increasing marginalisation by raising the age for unemployment benefit claimants from sixteen to eighteen (Coles, 1995).

The collapse in the youth labour market, when combined with neo-liberal government social and economic policies radically altered the structures of opportunities available to young people⁵. By the early 1980s the transitional life stage of youth had become more prolonged, more uncertain and—particularly for those vulnerable groups of young people already disadvantaged by race/ethnicity, class, disability and demographic location—more risky also. A number of working-class young people have been able to temporarily put off having to face the grim reality of unemployment, and have taken advantage of the new educational opportunities afforded to them by the widening participation

5 See, Ashton et al., 1990; Banks et al., 1992; Coles, 1995; MacDonald et al., 1997; Maguire and Maguire, 1997; Roberts, 1997.

agendas of the various colleges of both Further and Higher Education (Ainley, 1994). Nevertheless:

a significant minority of young people are left out of this process of increased educational participation. Their early 'career trajectories'—now largely absent of employment—lead them progressively towards the edges of their local labour markets. (MacDonald, 1997: 169)

Such socially excluded young people who are 'not in employment, education or participating on work-based training programmes' (Not in Employment Education or Training [NEET])—between the ages of sixteen and eighteen—are throughout the course of their lives also more likely to face higher than average rates of unemployment, under-employment, ill-health, poverty, imprisonment, homelessness and limited intergenerational mobility.⁶ In response to the growing concerns about the long term risks posed to civil society by an increasing number of disengaged young people, the Social Exclusion Unit was commissioned by:

the Prime Minister [Tony Blair] to work with other departments to assess how many 16-18 year-olds are not in education, work or training, analyse the reasons why, and produce proposals to reduce the numbers significantly. (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999: 2)

New Labour Government policy with regard to young people largely arose from the main conclusions of the Social Exclusion Unit's *'Bridging the Gap'* report (1999), which found that every year, at any one time, nearly 161,000 young people aged between 16 and 18 (or 9 per cent of the age group) were neither participating in formal education or training nor did they manage to obtain any kind of paid employment. Those young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (particularly those of African-Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin) were more likely to experience lengthier spells out of learning and work in comparison to their white and Indian peers. Whilst there is an acknowledgement by policy makers and academics about the particular difficulties faced by black and minority ethnic young people both educationally and in relation to a shifting youth labour market, there has been very little (if

6 See Blundell et al., 1999; Bryson et al., 2000; Coles et al., 2002; Ermisch and Francesconi, 2001; Flood-Page et al., 2000; Riley and Young, 2000; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999.

any at all) locally situated empirical research with these groups. Consequently, the policy agendas of the New Labour Government have largely been informed by those research studies and theoretical discourses centred on the transitions of socially excluded white working-class young people⁷, and has not allowed for a perspective—cross referenced with ethnicity, gender, class and spatial locality—which highlights the specific challenges (both economic and cultural) faced by black and minority ethnic youth.

This study

Underpinning much of this book is a concern with the range of transitions and post-16 experiences, choices and opportunities (or lack of them) available to young people, amidst changing global and local labour market conditions (see also Ball et al., 2004). Whilst there has been very little empirical research exploring the transitions of black and minority ethnic young people, there is a large body of academic literature devoted to the educational underachievement of African-Caribbean youth, particularly males. As there has been very little attention paid to their life experiences outside of the compulsory education system, it is this gap that I believe this study will attempt to fill. Significantly, this study takes as its starting point Tony Sewell's (1997) school-based ethnographic study '*Black masculinities and schooling*' which examines the role that youth subcultures play in the total experiences of African-Caribbean young men's schooling (see chapter one for further discussion).

Whilst acknowledging the importance of subculture within the lives of black young people, this study is nonetheless rooted within a broadly political economic theoretical framework. The majority of studies undertaken within the youth-as-transitions research tradition have been with white working-class young people, and largely undertaken in neighbourhoods and regions of the United Kingdom that have suffered high and persistent levels of structural unemployment (see, Banks et al., 1992; MacDonald et al., 1997, Johnston et al., 2000; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). These studies have largely been concerned with examining the impact of changing government policies, de-industrialisation and economic restructuring upon disadvantaged young peoples lives. This book is similarly interested in exploring the effects of recent political and socio-economic transformations on young people's lives—particularly black young people who are more likely to suffer lengthier spells out of learning and work (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). However, the key research question running throughout

7 See, Banks et al., 1992; MacDonald et al., 1997

the course of this study is 'how young people from the same locale and from [apparently] the same socio-economic background' (MacDonald et al., 2001: 5) but different ethnicities—black, white and mixed parentage—self-govern their own lives via the influence of the local subculture(s), as illustrated by their vastly divergent mainstream and alternative career paths.

This book seeks to avoid a solely economic interpretation of the young people's lives. One of the main criticisms levelled at the youth transitions approach is its pre-occupation with the availability (or lack) of waged labour which is perceived to be the 'ultimate goal' for all young working-class (particularly young male) youth. Some critics have argued that this:

consequent emphasis on production has led to a limited research paradigm focused on 'transition' as a rite of passage between developmental stages of psychological maturity and immaturity, complemented by a sociological transition narrowly restricted to [vocational] maturity and [nuclear] family formation.

(Cohen and Ainley, 2000: 80)

This economist approach explores working-class young people's transitions and mainstream and alternative career paths largely within the context of their increasing social, political, and economic marginalisation. The local and regional settings of much of the youth-as-transitions research might be described as 'socially excluded' areas that traditionally were reliant upon a few key industries, which have since almost entirely disappeared. In the past such locales provided working-class young males—on leaving secondary school—with a ready supply of entry level manual jobs thus smoothing their transitional journey into adulthood. As a consequence of economic re-structuring these same localities now provide limited work opportunities for school-leavers, which in addition to the consequent high levels of youth unemployment, also serves to block many young people's traditional progression route to adult status. Although largely sympathetic to the youth transitions approach and its emphasis on political economic analyses, this book is nevertheless critical of the economic and structurally determinist bias inherent within this model of youth research. This book gives greater recognition to young people as active human agents (Giddens, 1991) and also draws on the work of theorists and researchers from the academic sub-disciplines of cultural studies and the sociology of race relations; who highlight the importance and impact of micro cultural factors—racial/ethnic

identities, music, fashion and peer group networks—upon young people's post-16 choices and experiences (see particularly Nayak, 2003). Significantly, this book highlights the complex interplay between social class, spatial locality, race/ethnicity, gender and spatial locality and their combined impact on the young people's lives.

Organisation of book

The ensuing chapters of this study will flesh out the above themes. Chapter one, sets out to review the various research studies, news-media/populist discourses, and other literature pertaining to firstly; the perennial black 'youth problem' which has loomed large throughout the entire period of post Second World War black settlement in Britain. Secondly, the black British youth experience(s) as viewed through the lens of contemporary subcultural theory with its concern with questions around identity, hybridity and urban multi-culture. Chapter 2, '*Black East London*', provides an historical overview of the main social, political, and economic developments that have shaped East London, particularly those major changes that have occurred within the past thirty to forty years. Central to this discussion will be the location and exploration of what I refer to as 'Black East London', which is defined and determined by significant levels of black settlement. This chapter will also discuss the extent to which the social deprivation and social exclusion faced by East London's black and minority ethnic and refugee residents is also shared by their white working-class neighbours.

In chapter three, '*Researching youth in Manor*,' I move on to discuss the key methodological issues, dilemmas and concerns around my research with the young people. The first part of the chapter details my previous history (and familiarity) with the research site, as well as many of the young people who consequently feature in this study.

Chapter four, '*Education, employment and training*', will firstly examine the young people's views and opinions concerning their experiences of secondary school, particularly their relationships with their teachers. I will then move onto discuss the informants post-16 choices, opportunities and experiences particularly with regard further education, paid part-time and full-time employment, as well as alternative employment opportunities 'working on road' doing 'badness'. In chapter five, '*Families and home-life*', I explore and discuss the family and home-life experiences of those black young people—as well as many of their white and mixed parentage peers—who are featured throughout

this study. A further key feature of this chapter will be to explore black young men's school-to-work transitions, taking into consideration the influence of family/home-life as a counterpoint to 'road culture'. Chapter six, '*Road cultures I*', attempts to both document and analyse the role of road culture in the lives of those young people featured in this study. It is particularly interested in exploring the means by which my informants 'kill time' with their friends, derive camaraderie, joy, entertainment and a sense of identity and belonging. This chapter also assesses the influence of 'badness' and 'rude boy' affectations upon the majority of young people's attitudes, values, 'road postures' and dress codes. Chapter seven, '*Road cultures II*', is more concerned with exploring the role and significance of 'badness' within East London Road cultures. Firstly, I look at issues of safety and danger in Manor and other 'places' taking into account the young people's kinship, family and friendship networks. The second part of this chapter focuses upon the young people's perceptions of and experiences of 'badness', and then moves on to look at a small minority of mainly black young men who opt for alternative pre-16 and post-16 career paths centred on 'badness'.