A Story of Failure

The mirroring of social and psychological exclusion among young men in an English inner city

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Some Background Data

• Black men account for 70% of the over-representation of Black groups in secondary mental healthcare (20% in 2005 to 23% in 2010).

• Detention rates (under the Mental Health Act 1983) were between 19% and 32% higher than average among Black Caribbean, Other Black and Mixed White and Black Caribbean groups, while detention under Section 37 of the act (which allows a court to send someone to hospital for treatment in lieu of a prison sentence) was between 77% and 100% higher than average for those same ethnicities.

• Despite being only 2.7% of the total population over 10 years old in England and Wales, Black and Mixed White and Black groups are 13% of the prison population (Centre for Social Justice, 2011) and significantly more likely to occupy forensic medium-secure units (Thomas et al, 2009).

• Recent Ministry of Justice (2011) figures reveal that between 2007 and 2010, Black groups were 14.6% of all stop and searches, 8% of all arrests, 7.1% of all cautions, 6% of all court order supervisions and 12% of all homicides.
Some Background Data

- Young Black people are over-represented at all stages of the youth justice system, with an arrest rate among Black 10-17 year olds four times that for Whites.

- A Home Affairs Select Committee established to consider the issue in 2007, found young Black men more likely to be stopped and searched by the police, less likely to be given unconditional bail, more likely to be remanded in custody, and more likely to receive more punitive sentences than White young offenders (Home Office, 2007).

- By the time the fieldwork for this study had finished, a Youth Justice Board report had just been published that showed the proportion of Black young men in offender institutions had risen from 23% in 2006 and 33% in 2009/10 to 39% in 2011 (Travis, 2011, see also Ball et al, 2011).

- But Black boys do show up considerably more frequently in places like youth offending teams (Youth Justice Board, 2012); Pupil Referral Units (Department of Education, 2011); child protection registers and in care (Owen & Staham, 2009); and/or with a Statement of Special Educational Need (Lindsay, Pather & Strand, 2006).
About The Study

- A Participatory Action Research (PAR) project with seven young men aged 15-24 based in St Pauls, Bristol. Weekly group work reflecting and describing an auto-ethnography of life lived in the neighbourhood, and culminating in a social action project.

- The fieldwork ran in total from June 2010 through to September 2011, and finished when the rioting that summer reached Bristol having erupted in London and several other inner cities across England.

- The research focus was decided upon by my young co-participants, and they decided that respect, gang violence, drugs, money and racism were the most important issues in and around their lives they wanted to describe.

- The choice of PAR was designed to return some of the value of the research process to the young men, but also because as ‘insiders’, my co-participants simply knew things about their lives that I didn’t, were able to describe how their worlds were connected, and also much less likely to pathologise or criminalise themselves.
About The Seminar

- A participatory ethnography and analysis of the local moral economy made by young Black men negotiating the multiple violences of advanced marginality.

- A reframing of mental health from a perspective that considers both ‘the objective divisions that pattern social space and the subjective visions that people acquire of their position and extant possibilities in it’ (Wacquant, 2008, p. 197).

- A renascent idea borrowed from critical psychiatry; that the study of mental health must involve the study of situations, not just individuals (Laing, 1968). Moreover, that the study of democracy must involve consideration of the ways in which citizenship is constructed, situated and embodied both psychologically and emotionally in time and place.

- This seminar is about the mirroring of social and psychic structures and the consequent ‘psychopolitics’ of mental healthcare (Sedgwick, 1982).
Participatory Analysis

Economic structure of Bristol / Discourses about (young) Black men / Social class / Ideology embedded in public service delivery / Gentrification /

Values and behaviours in search of ‘respect’ / Earned status / Models of manhood / The ‘hustle’ / Territoriality / The ‘story of failure’ / Resistance / Expressions of (young) Black masculinity / Hyper-hetero-sexuality

Internalised oppression / Body language (swagga) / Self-esteem and confidence / Horizons / Anger / Hyper-vigilance / Anxiety / Depression / Fatalism
St Pauls is home to a police station, the offices of Bristol’s Youth Offending Team, the regional Probation Service, and one of the city’s four social services offices, the Welsman.
Despite its small size, St Pauls is home to thirty one closed circuit cameras, a figure that excludes the thirteen devices (one for every fourteen children) located in Cabot Primary School (Bristol Evening Post, 2011b). Neighbourhood wide, that’s a camera for roughly every 97 residents, compared to one camera for every 554 in Bristol overall.
The Ashley ward, and within it St Pauls, has the highest percentage of child referrals to social care in the city (43%, Bristol average 24%) as well as referrals for mental health (22%, Bristol average 11%) (North Bristol Primary Care Trust, 2010).
81% of children in St Pauls live in income deprived households (Bristol City Council, 2011) and the area has a higher percentage of lone parent households with dependant children (11%) than Bristol (7.4%) or England and Wales (6.5%) (North Bristol Primary Care Trust, 2004).
Crime in St Pauls is in the top 2% for England and Wales, with a rate (the number of crimes per 1000 people) of 66.06. (Avon and Somerset Police, 2013).
Welcome To St Pauls
Too much people have the story of failure round here... try and fail. Not much people can say they done this and it worked out. Once you get success you’re gone, they have to leave here. No-one stays.

Lawrence

It’s like this, if I’m hungry and I see fruit on a tree, but you tell me you own the tree and the fruit and the land around the tree, so I can’t even get the old fruit that’s fallen on the floor. If I’m hungry and got no money to buy your fruit, if I’m hungry and you tell me that; sorry, I’m just gonna take the fruit.

Marcel

Sometimes it’s not even trying to find respect from your friends (dealing drugs). It’s more to try and help out your family. Some people that mug and rob people’s houses, they will try to sell it. I know it’s bad, but to kind of help out their mum when she’s struggling on bills and all that.

Ashley
Deproletarianization

• Since the eighties, there has been a profound labour market shift, from manufacturing to education-intensive jobs on the one hand, and to de-skilled service sector jobs on the other. The class structure has collapsed for a portion of young people resident in the inner city and meant not just the loss of income or erratic employment but outright denial to wage earning activities.

• During the project, more than half of the young Black men available for work in Britain were/are unemployed, and the unemployment rate since the 2008 crash has increased at twice the rate for Black 16-24 year olds as it has for white young people. According to the Office for National Statistics, unemployment among young Black men (16-24) doubled in three years, from 28.8% in 2008 to 55.9% in 2011 (Ball, Milmo & Ferguson, 2012), a rate higher even than in the United States (Ramesh, 2012).

• The distributive trade in drugs has, since the late eighties, moved into the economic and physical spaces left behind, and performs and important subterranean welfare function for many families.
The Drug Trade: An Equal Opportunities Employer
When you were doing bad and you got your money, and you seen how much you were getting, you’d want the same but in a good way, and it wouldn’t come to you. I remember when I used to deal drugs man. The guy I was doing it with, ‘cos I was selling more than him, he got angry and was like; ‘hold on, who are you going to’? And I was like; ‘these are my links, don’t ask me’, and ‘cos I had more money than him he tried to fight me and take my money. We were good friends and I was like; ‘what’s the matter with you? It’s just money!’ He’s like, ‘look at what money can buy you – everything’. We ain’t friends no more.
In Search of Respect

Respect and who you know, that’s basically the tools for survival when you live in a place like this.

Ashley

It seems like they will get on you if you’re seen as a weak person. You have to show you have a bad side while you’re growing, otherwise you get run over. The thing is that you can’t come to a point where if you live in St Pauls, St Pauls people don’t respect you. Really, if you thought hard about all the people that you know in beef in Easton and St Pauls, people that you know you could probably knock out in one punch but they on this hype thing, and they can’t even fight you to defend themselves. The pressure that they couldn’t even defend themselves in their own ends has forced them into this hype and running around with a knife and stuff.

Lawrence
The Borders of Urban Belonging

Like, because of the stabbing there was all this hype, St Pauls and Easton stuff went crazy. The Easton lot was all ‘if you come to our ends we’re gonna beat you up, any St Pauls man we see is gonna get shanked.

Tyreese

When we were younger we used to get out of St Pauls for the day, just to see what it was like... we used to go out of Bristol sometimes. These next generation never leave. They see the Yardie car, the jewellery, they want the lifestyle, but there’s only one way they see - to sell drugs and hustle. If that’s all we saw that’s all we would have wanted too.

Sol

Yeah, and it’s stupid, you can cross one bridge and everything changes. It’s been happening for quite a while.

Ashley
Urban space is a historical and political construction in the strong sense of the term, (to forget this) would be to risk (mis)taking for ‘neighbourhood effects’ what is nothing more than the spatial retranslation of economic and social differences.

(Wacquant, 2008).
Contradictorily, the street culture of resistance is predicated on the destruction of its participants and the community harbouring them. In other words, although street culture emerges out of personal search for dignity and a rejection of racism and subjugation, it ultimately becomes an active agent in personal degradation and community ruin.

(Bourgois, 2002).
A Black person will trust a White person more than another Black person, because Black people are too money greedy. They love money too much. If you give them two grand to hold and look after, they’ll spend at least a quarter of it and say; ‘ah, that’s for looking after it’, or some dumb excuse. You can trust a white man more with your money than a Black man.

Tyreese

If someone speaks a bit posh, you gun them down and say they’re ‘wash out.’ (Mockingly) ‘So let me wear my saggy trousers and stuff’. You lot just naturally think if you give a Black person a job with money, and you had a choice between the Black man and the white man working with your money, you’d rather pick the white guy just because the way you been built up to think. Like, you just think the Black guy is gonna take the money and run away. (Laughter). That’s just how you think in your mind, ‘cos you’ve been stereotyped for so long that that’s just in you lots mind. Once you get out of that you’ll feel better.

Lawrence
JERMAINE - They all hustlin’ though, all peoples.

TYREESE - Yeah, but Asians come down here and make their own little shop and stuff, start makin’ money, get a Land Rover, Porsche, a Ferrari. Then we just sit there lookin’ at it. We want to get that, we want to make it, but we too dumb, we just sit there getting locked up.

LAWRENCE - Who would you associate with the fancy cars just in Bristol, in general?

ASHLEY - Asians

LAWRENCE - Who would you associate with running the big business in town?

ASHLEY - White people.

LAWRENCE - Who do you associate with running the local corner shops in every area?

TYREESE - Asians... and Somalis

LAWRENCE - Who would you associate the Black people with?

ASHLEY/TYREESE - Drug dealing! (Laughter).
Older cultural narratives are being eroded by the emergence of an adolescent street culture that synthesises diasporic elements of American, Jamaican and British cultures in a subjective articulation of resistance made ultimately from the degrading and dehumanising raw materials of Black objectification at the white centre of British society. Made from such psychic and cultural matter, street culture in the end cannot help but recycle the same inheritance, and even takes over most of the ideological labour in the process.

The result is a trans-generational mutation of social and family structures, gender roles and sexual politics, and a gnawing ontological insecurity that is personal and relational; the consequence of spoiled child and adult attachments established in a landscape of contemporary social exclusion, migration, and an inheritance of historical trauma (see Arnold, 2008, 2012 and DeGruy-Leary, 2005).

This ain’t nothing racist, but I reckon this neighbourhood needs more white people. The thing is, white people give a good vibe, I reckon white people give a good vibe.

Ashley
I think it’s because of the stereotyping Black people. Say for example someone was driving a nice car, coming towards a group of Black kids, and you went; ‘what person you think is driving that car?’ They’ll never say a Black man. If a Black man was driving that car, they’d be, like... well you look twice. So their stereotype even stops them seeing the Black people who are doing like the right thing, like the positive stuff in the area. That’s all they’re focussed on now, their mindset, ‘cos it’s not normal to them and so they shoot that person down and cuss on them. It’s not normal for them to be where they’re wearing suits instead of wearing the baggy jeans and the latest name brands and stuff. So, it’s not like they do it on purpose, but their mindset is so corrupted that they don’t see it as normal. They try to diss the person, so then it kind of stops them from doing it too. I think that’s what’s happening here.

Lawrence
The Mirroring of Social & Psychological Structures

- The political and economic structure of their marginality is mirrored in the cultural landscape of the street, the moral economy made from it, and the psychological, emotional and behavioural states these structures privilege. Viewed from the perspective of my co-participants, the violences of street culture constitute an embodied and inherited but (socio)logical response to the massive structural violence visited upon them from above by a set of mutually reinforcing economic and sociopolitical changes (Wacquant, 2008).

- When oppression is somatised and loaded into the local *habitus*, it contributes to a kind of dialectical short circuit that naturalises inferiority by making it (appear) real. Thus the story of failure is in *habitus* the story of Black failure; ‘embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history’ (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 56).

- The most important feature of this psyche/social mirroring is its visibility at all levels of local street culture, which for all its subversions, emphasises and packages material success and commercialism (*swagga*), entrepreneurialism (*enterprisin’*), and individualism (*respect*) in ways entirely consistent with the prevailing socioeconomic system’s ideology and values.
To be happy and well adjusted is a false ideal. When the wealthiest 20 percent of the world's people use 86% of the goods, and earn 74 times the income of the poorest 20 percent, it may be that those who are worried, anxious, sleepless, or depressed are having the most compassionate, healthy and realistic responses.

Mary Watkins, 2008
Mental Health, Citizenship, & Participation

- The language of health is a depoliticising one, and, conceptually the natural science model through which mental health research exerts an influence functions to strip the young men in this study of their context, obscuring the systemic bases of their psychological and emotional health.

- The key constituent in the sociogenesis of psychopathology is the unequal distribution of power in society (Prilleltensky, 1994), a perspective that is highly political and makes different demands of clinicians and public services.

- Central to the argument I wish to make for uniting psychological health with theories of children and young people’s participation is the idea of self definition. The medicalisation of social problems in young people is not only unscientific, it is fundamentally unjust and undemocratic. When young people’s psychic and cultural attempts to survive oppression are reduced to labels like ‘conduct disorder’, mental health professionals are no less than complicit agents in reproducing the status quo.
Citizenship and participation then become central to the discussion, not only for their relationship to our mental health services and their role in denying young people both, but because the road to 'better mental health' (for us all) is the same as that which young people must take to define and claim their rights as citizens.

When a child or young person ‘suffers the censorship of (his or) her own childhood as abnormal, lost, marginal or dysfunctional, how is it possible for (he or) she to be the addressee of children’s rights if (he or) she does not even belong to the category of children?’ (Cordero Arce, 2012, p. 386).

For my co-participants, self definition is key to a process of de-colonisation from the claims and stereotypes (discourse) adults and history make and enforce about them. It is also a political process, because freedom lies not just in discovering or being able to determine who we are, ‘but in rebelling against those ways in which we are already defined, categorized and classified’ (Rajchman, 1984, in Cannela & Viruru, 2004, p. 49).

Young people growing up in these spaces of advanced marginality are denied the basic economic ladders that bind and stabilise the overall social contract to a shared image of citizenship and, decreasingly, nation. The class structure is collapsed in these places; at the same time, postmodernism, through its syncretic, heterogenous every day presence, unveils itself in ways that also undermines the conceptual basis and lived meaning of citizenship and nationhood.
Mental Health, Citizenship, & Participation

**Positivism** is the assumption that knowledge must be limited to verifiable facts. Positivism then recognises nothing beyond what is given, ignoring the metaphysical and everything prohibited by the existing reality; that is, everything that does not exist but would under other conditions be historically possible (Martín-Baró, 1994).

**Individualism** assumes the individual to be the sole and most meaningful unit of psychological enquiry. This creates difficulties (often translated into insurmountable service boundaries and transitions) not only for understanding how mind and body interact, but also for how mind and social context interact.

This is an ideological supposition, a concession to the prevailing economic and political logic of capitalism that lauds self-help and measures success and failure against a ‘supreme self’ that supersedes the system (Altman, 2010).
Mental Health, Citizenship, & Participation

**Hedonism**, a third assumption of psychological science, proposes that behind every action and motive is a desire for self-gratification and pleasure. Much like individualism, this assumption is equally well ‘a concession to the profit motive that underlies the capitalist system, and as such, an attribution to human nature of something that has to do with the functioning of a particular socioeconomic system’ (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 22).

**Ahistoricism** extends all other assumptions to a universal reading of human nature, one where there exist no fundamental differences between the psychic structures of my co-participants in St Pauls and a middle class investment banker in The City. As a result, the conceptual terrain for ‘disorder’ and ‘maladjustment’ is made against the presumed context of psychological equality, and the complete absence of structural inequality and social context in time as well as space. This is also, crucially, a repression of the idea of potential and historical change, of another way of being.

**Homeostasis** says that states of crisis, disruption, or disequilibrium, are anathema to what is the ideal state of psychological health: stability and stasis. The assumption extends itself to an articulation of Gramscian hegemony and the project of controlling difference and disequilibrium through a culture-personality dynamic.
A new political psychology, which ‘we could define... as the study of the psychological processes through which persons and groups shape, struggle over, and exercise the power needed for satisfying certain interests within a social formation, the way they are mediated through the individual psyche of the various actors, and the behaviour involved in shaping, struggling over, and wielding power’

(Martín-Baró, 1994).
Concluding Thoughts 1/2

- Local masculinities and their expression through street culture are more complicated, contradictory, syncretic and contingent than moralising adjectives like abnormal, delinquent, deviant, or pathological suppose. To that end when policy makers and professionals decide upon and apply their developmental milestones, labels, and rights, they are (however benignly) complicit in an administration of ideological power that strips (these) young men of their context, individualising their suffering in a way that is fundamentally unjust and undemocratic.

- This study describes a field of experience. It’s not the only one in St Pauls, and it’s not even the only one among young Black men resident in the inner city. Even my co-participants were able to hold contradictory attitudes and behaviours, especially in relation to race.

- Discourse, as it flows in and through St Pauls, not just contemporarily, but cumulatively as it has pooled and been struggled over these past forty or so years, produces a structure of being and feeling that is to varying degrees depressive, anxious, angry, traumatised, bored, desperate, aggressive, fatalistic and violent. That many of St Pauls inhabitants should feel the same way is neither surprising nor evidence of some ethnoracially or culture bound conclusion.
Concluding Thoughts 2/2

• The same is true of the emotional and psychological landscape in St Pauls. The structure of feeling is one made from above, where anxiety, paranoia, anger and hyper-vigilance are socio-logical consequences of the horizontal violences that occur where neoliberal values colonise everyday life but the economic structures are exclusive.

• ‘Such internecine violence ‘from below’ must be analysed not as expression of the senseless ‘pathology’ of residents... but as a function of the degree of penetration and mode of regulation of this territory by the state. It is a reasoned response (in the double sense of echo and retort) to various kinds of violence ‘from above’ (Waquant, 2008, p. 54).

• Although excluded and marginalised, these young men are actually central actors in a system predicated on their defeat and status as ‘outsiders’. Despite their exclusion, they offer a new angle on Britishness, not an experience separate from it.
In many tribal cultures, it was said that if the boys were not initiated into manhood, if they were not shaped by the skills and love of elders, then they would destroy the culture. If the fires that innately burn inside us are not intentionally and lovingly added to the heart of the community, they will burn down the structures of culture, just to feel the warmth.

Michael Meade, 2002
The patterns, over the generations and stuff, everything is just repeating itself.

Marcel.