Ambivalence in the motivation of black Caribbean boys

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Abstract

Raising the level of achievement of black Caribbean boys is a concern of government educational policy. This paper focuses on the academic motivation of black Caribbean boys and examines the usefulness of the concept of ambivalence, as opposed to rational choice, in explaining their motivation. A mixed methodology was employed. Questionnaires were administered to 500 16-year-olds in multi-ethnic schools in Birmingham and also in Jamaica, enabling quantitative comparisons to be made between black Caribbean boys and boys of other ethnic groups. A small sample of these boys and their parents were interviewed so that accounts of their own (or their son’s) motivation could be elicited. Ambivalence was found to characterise the boys’ motivation in the disjuncture between their attitudes and behaviour, linked to the conflicting social influences acting upon them, and the ideological contradiction between equal opportunities discourse and their perception of discrimination against them.

Introduction

The educational achievement of black boys is an issue in Britain, as it is in the U.S.A. and in several countries of the Caribbean. DFES figures for 2005 show only one-third of black Caribbean boys achieving 5 or more GCSEs at A* to C compared to one-half of black Caribbean girls or other boys (DFES 2006). Among black Caribbeans accepted onto degree courses at British universities in 2005, women outnumbered men by almost two to one (UCAS 2006). Black boys are being outperformed by black girls and by boys of other ethnic groups. Their continued poor academic achievement will continue to marginalise the black male, making it harder for people of Caribbean origin to participate fully in the knowledge economy of the future.

This study

On the basis of evidence that low motivation may be partly to blame (Fitzgerald 2000), this paper examines the academic motivation of black Caribbean boys in a British city and relates it to their perceptions of discrimination in employment. The findings are discussed in terms of rational choice versus ambivalence. The paper is a re-analysis of some findings of a larger study which investigated the gender gap in motivation between black Caribbean boys and girls and attempted to relate it to differential perceptions of discrimination in employment. The original study had assumed a rational choice perspective.

Plan of the paper

This paper starts with a discussion of the concept of ambivalence as it has been used in psychology and sociology, contrasting it with the idea of rational choice, and suggesting its usefulness in explaining apparent contradictions within the motivation of some black pupils. It goes on to describe the research methodology of the study and to propose how possible outcomes could support either rational choice or ambivalence. The relevant findings are then presented. Findings on the motivation of black Caribbean boys are compared to those of other ethnic/gender groups and discussed in terms of the literature. Perceptions of discrimination held by these boys and their parents are described and the lack of a clear, logical connection between these perceptions and the boys’ motivation is noted. Next the contradictory influence of significant others is presented. The findings as a whole are then discussed in relation to the concept of ambivalence as against rational choice. Finally, a sociological interpretation is offered for the ambivalence shown in black Caribbean boys’ motivation and some implications for the future are suggested.
Rational Choice Theory versus Ambivalence

Rational choice theory in the social sciences assumes that action by individuals is unconstrained by norms, and that individuals have complete information and make rational calculations upon which rational behaviour is based, in order to maximise utility. Smelser (1997) proposed that the rational choice model works best in situations of relative freedom, but less well where there is a power imbalance. In the latter situation, ambivalence is more likely to be the case. Ambivalence is the simultaneous existence of attraction and repulsion. Smelser argued that a different set of assumptions and explanatory strategies are needed to understand situations of freedom in contrast to those of dependence. He argued that the concept of ambivalence is useful in explaining situations beyond those of rational choice theory, viewing the theories as complementary rather than as mutually exclusive.

The way racial discrimination affects the educational attainment of black people has been analysed in terms of rational choice theory by Becker (1957) in the USA and by Miller (1991) in Jamaica. Black Americans, Becker argued, made less investment in education than whites because discrimination in employment would mean that they would obtain a lower rate of return from it. Miller extended this idea to the lower achievement of black boys than girls in Jamaica, arguing that there was greater discrimination against black working class boys than against black working class girls in moving into middle class occupations traditionally taken by brown or white people. He proposed that boys achieved at a lower level than girls because the boys, their parents and teachers, recognized the lower returns likely to be gained from education and therefore adjusted their investment in money, time and energy downwards, leading to poorer examination results.

The alternative concept is that of ambivalence. This concept has been developed from the fields of psychology and sociology. In psychology (e.g. Freud) it has been used to refer to the individual’s opposing feelings towards the same object while in sociology (Merton and Barber 1963) it has been used to mean the contradictory demands that may be put upon an individual in a role, status or set of statuses. Ambivalence has been developed as a useful bridging concept (Weigert 1991, Connidis & McMullin 2002) between different levels of explanation of human behaviour. Within critical theory, Connidis and McMullin see structural conflicts of interest between dominant and subordinate social groups, which are realised as conflicts within interlocking sets of social relations, as leading to psychological conflicts within individuals. Thus sociological ambivalence is linked to psychological ambivalence.

Motivation theory has also made use of the idea of ambivalence. Weigert (1991) defined motivational ambivalence as ‘the simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from pursuing a particular line of action.’ Such ambivalence, he claimed, may result from contradictions in the social structure and result in a state of weakened motivation in which decisions are blocked and actions are inhibited. Psychological ambivalence stands between socio-cultural contradictions and the decisions and actions of individuals (Weigert 1991 p.43).

Such socio-cultural contradictions may be particularly felt by blacks in white-dominated societies. Describing how modern societies proclaim two contradictory principles, the principle of equality of opportunity but also of the right of privileged groups to retain their privilege, Dench (1986) showed that awareness of discrimination exists alongside belief in equal opportunities, producing ambivalence in the motivation of these groups. Motivation may be divided between aspiring to success in the majority society’s terms or to success in terms of the minority culture.
The concept of ambivalence could be applicable to the interpretation of findings on the motivation of black Americans, where contradictions have been found when applying psychological theories based on research on whites. Graham (1994), in a review of 140 studies of the motivation of black Americans, found inconsistencies between findings for black compared to white children. Attempts to explain such inconsistencies have taken into account the subordinated position of blacks in US society and the contradictions between the dominant equal opportunities rhetoric and the perception of the reality of racial discrimination. Ogbu (1991) provided the vital link here. He proposed, on the basis of research by himself and others into motivation among children from various ethnic minorities, that such groups experience a conflict like that described by Dench (1986) between the dominant ideology of equality of opportunity and the concurrent perception of discrimination. Therefore black youngsters may experience motivational ambivalence; they may be torn between aspiring to success in white society (‘acting white’) or to success within black society, involving displays of symbols of blackness.

Further research has interrogated Ogbu’s ideas. Mickelson (1990) found a contradiction between black US high school students’ ‘abstract’ attitudes to education and their ‘concrete’ attitudes. While expressing positive attitudes to the value of education in general terms, they did not believe that education would be useful to themselves personally in their concrete situations, resulting in lowered motivation. Taking this further, McWhorter (2000) ascribed his black students’ low motivation to: powerful antipathies lying beneath the surface in a great many black students (2000, p150), despite expressed support for education, based on historical exclusion from education. These findings suggest that ambivalence rather than rational choice characterises the motivation of black Americans.

In looking again at my own research findings, I am going to compare how well the rational choice and ambivalence models fit the data.

**Methodology**

My research used a mixed methodology. Questionnaires were administered to 500 sixteen-year-olds in school year eleven, 435 in Birmingham and 65 in Jamaica. In Birmingham, schools with a high percentage of Caribbean pupils were chosen but even so only 42 boys who identified themselves as being black Caribbean were obtained. Efforts were made to obtain sufficient middle class and high achieving black boys to avoid a focus on low achievers. Three quarters of the Caribbean boys were from comprehensive schools and one quarter from grammar schools. Roughly one third had a parent in non-manual work, one third in manual work and the other third either unemployed or not given. The proportions were similar for the black Caribbean boys and for the sample as a whole. Boys and girls of all ethnic groups were asked to complete Likert-type questions on their motivation and perceptions of discrimination in employment, which were subsequently scored and subjected to factor analysis to form uni-dimensional scales. Questions on the influence of significant others were included as it was anticipated that these would impact on boys’ motivation.

Interviews were conducted with eight of the boys who had given assent on the questionnaire and with five of their parents. These interviewees were selected to include a variety of combinations of high and low scores on motivation and perceived discrimination scales, and a variety of school types, achievement levels, social classes and family types (one- or two-parent). Interviews with the children were carried out on school premises by a female interviewer of black Caribbean origin, and with the parents in their homes by
myself, a white Englishwoman recently returned from living and teaching in Jamaica. Interviews were semi-structured and enquired more deeply into the young people’s accounts of their own motivation and their perceptions of discrimination in employment. Thus while the questionnaires provided a broad sweep, enabling quantitative comparisons by ethnicity, nationality, gender and social class to be made, the interviews allowed more detailed pictures of individuals to be built up and the views of the young people and their parents to be expressed in their own words.

If the low motivation of black Caribbean boys could be explained in terms of rational choice, one may expect to find that the boys (and their parents) could offer a logical explanation for the low motivation, that there would be consistency between their attitudes to education and their motivated behaviour, that the existence of discrimination in employment could be clearly assessed and articulated, and that the motivational influence of significant others would act in a consistent direction.

If, however, ambivalence theory were more appropriate, one may expect to find that the boys and their parents would be unable to offer a reasonable explanation for their low motivation, that their attitudes to education would be inconsistent with their behaviour, that the existence of discrimination in employment may not be clearly assessed or articulated, and that the motivational influence of parents, teachers and peers may be conflicting.

Findings

The statistical analyses performed here are descriptive rather than inferential because the sample was not randomly selected. Any statistically significant results indicate that the association was large enough to be important in this particular sample; it does not mean that it can be generalised to a larger population.

1. Low motivation and lack of improvement

Firstly, the motivation scores for the ethnic/gender groups in my sample were compared with a measure of improvement (see Graph 1). This measure of improvement was calculated from official statistics from Birmingham City Council for the whole age cohort, since I was not able to obtain this data for the particular children in my sample. ‘Improvement’ is the difference in percentage of pupils achieving government targets at Key Stage Three and at GCSE for the cohort sitting GCSE in 2001. My questionnaire sample constituted a sample of this cohort. The ‘improvements’ are mainly negative since a smaller percentage of most groups reached the GCSE target of 5 A*-C grades than reached the KS3 target (of level 5). Motivation was measured on a scale from 1 (low) to 4 (high).
The scatter graph shows a pattern of greater improvement in groups with higher motivation scores. It shows black Caribbean boys having the lowest motivation scores and making the least improvement, with Bangladesi and Pakistani girls having the highest motivation scores and making the greatest improvement. This underlines the importance of motivation in academic achievement and confirms motivation as being a relevant area on which to focus in explaining the relatively poor achievement of black Caribbean boys.

I next focus on differences in motivation scores between black Caribbean boys and boys of other (large enough) ethnic groups, including black Jamaicans in Jamaica. The mean scores are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Caribbean</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2.3931</td>
<td>.45629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2.6163</td>
<td>.62465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>2.7394</td>
<td>.43073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaican</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2.8438</td>
<td>.54776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>2.6484</td>
<td>.53886</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They show the black Caribbean boys in Birmingham having a lower motivation score than boys of other ethnic groups in Birmingham or of Jamaican boys in Jamaica, who had the highest score on identical items. A one-way ANOVA showed that differences significant at the 1% level (p = 0.01) occurred among these groups. A Tukey post hoc test showed that the significant differences occurred between black Caribbean boys and Indians and Jamaicans; the difference between black Caribbean and white boys in my sample was not statistically significant.
2. Positive attitude but poorly motivated behaviour

When a factor analysis was performed on the motivation scores, three factors emerged. Factor 1 consisted of three items on classroom behaviour (liking to sit at the back of the class and chat); factor 2 seemed to be about engagement at a deeper level with the aims of the school (making an effort and staying out of trouble); while factor 3 concerned attitude to the importance of educational qualifications. The factors were scored on a range from 1 (low motivation) to 4 (high motivation). Graph 2, below, compares scores on these factors for boys by ethnic group.

**Motivation factors by ethnic group**

### Boys only

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Motivation factor 1 (sit and chat)</th>
<th>Motivation factor 2 (effort and trouble)</th>
<th>Motivation factor 3 (attitude)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Caribbean</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaican</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Graph 2 Motivation factors by ethnic group**

The bars show that the Black Caribbean boys had at least as favourable an attitude to the importance of educational qualifications as the boys of other ethnic groups (factor 3) but that this was accompanied by lower scores on the behavioural factors, 1 and 2. There was a noticeable discrepancy between attitude and behaviour for the black Caribbean boys compared to the other groups. A one-way ANOVA carried out on these three factors showed that significant differences occurred among ethnic groups on factors 1 (p = 0.000) and 2 (p = 0.007) but not quite on factor 3 (p = 0.051). A Tukey post hoc test revealed that on factor 1 the significant differences occurred between the black Caribbeans and each of the other three groups, and on factor 2 between black Caribbeans and Jamaicans only.

The crucial point here is that there was a greater discrepancy between attitude (factor 3) and behaviour (factors 1 and 2) for the black Caribbeans than for any of the other ethnic groups. The white, Indian and Jamaican boys were more consistent in having motivated behaviours that more nearly matched their attitudes to education. Black Caribbean boys averred highly favourable attitudes to gaining qualifications but largely failed to match their actions to their words. It is here that the concept of ambivalence seems appropriate. Somehow their commitment was not wholehearted; something intervened to prevent them following up on their convictions.
The interviews with black Caribbean pupils and their parents strengthened the questionnaire analysis. Boys tended to assess their own motivation as being low: *I think I’m just lazy* (Moses); *I don’t usually work my hardest – cos, all the time I just – I don’t know why* (Joseph). Their parents had even stronger views: *Bone idle. Because he’s very bright, tends to just think – ‘Oh, I’ll do the bare minimum to get by’* (Raymond’s mother); *It’s that kind of lackadaisy or nonchalant attitude about him* (Ricardo’s father). Yet they unanimously agreed on the importance of obtaining educational qualifications for their future prospects.

Thus these black Caribbean boys in Britain did not seem to fit with rational choice theory as used by Miller. They did not see education as being of limited use to them and therefore make less effort, but rather they valued educational qualifications highly but, apparently irrationally, did not pursue qualifications through motivated behaviour. They more closely resembled the black Americans described by McWhorter, Graham and Ogbu who also exhibited inconsistencies between their stated positive attitudes and lack of motivated behaviour in the classroom.

I now turn to the way the boys perceived possible discrimination against themselves in the world of work.

### 3. Perceived discrimination

The perception of discrimination items were subjected to a factor analysis and three factors were revealed: race discrimination, unfairness and gender discrimination. ‘Race discrimination’ consisted of four items measuring the degree of perceived potential race discrimination in employment against oneself. ‘Unfairness’ consisted of five items to do with the extent to which society was perceived to be fair and meritocratic. ‘Gender discrimination’ contained three items on the degree of potential perceived gender discrimination against oneself. The mean scores on these factors for boys of the three major ethnic groups in the sample are shown in Graph 3. The Jamaicans in Jamaica could not be included because the items were not quite the same in the Jamaican questionnaire. Each factor was measured on a scale from 1 to 4.
Discrimination factors by ethnic group

The bars show that black Caribbean boys perceived higher levels of race discrimination and unfairness than did whites or Indians but that gender discrimination was much the same for each group. A one-way ANOVA and Tukey post hoc test showed that the differences between black Caribbeans and each of the other groups on race discrimination were statistically significant (p = 0.000 with whites and p = 0.012 with Indians); and on unfairness only the difference between black Caribbeans and whites was significant (p = 0.005). There were no significant differences on gender discrimination. The picture here is one of black Caribbean boys having strong perceptions of discrimination in employment based on their race.

In the interviews with black Caribbean boys and their parents, this perception was confirmed and elaborated upon. Problems were anticipated in getting a job: *It's harder for black people to get work* (Joseph) and in achieving higher status: *You don't really see black men in high ranks….Instead of putting me as manager, they'd put a white man as manager, and the black man as assistant manager* (Moses). Half of the boys did not believe they had a fair chance, such as Raymond: *I'm a young black Caribbean from (a district in) Birmingham. Not a fair chance at all.* The boys’ parents told of their own experiences with race discrimination in a variety of occupations which had led them to believe that discrimination would be a problem for their sons. Ricardo’s father said: *Theoretically, Ricardo’s chances in life should be better than mine, it should be, and I would like it to be, but I think his chances in life is 50:50.* He himself had found: *The jobs are there but you’re not getting it. Even if you do get the job you’ve still got to prove yourself ten times more than the white person.* Mark’s mother saw promotion as being harder for the black person: *They’ll try and keep you down as much as they can.*
**Hidden nature of discrimination**

Several of the boys had been quite reluctant to discuss race discrimination, even with the black interviewer. There had been long pauses, embarrassed laughs and hesitations when confronted with making a hypothetical employer’s choice between a black and a white candidate for a teaching post. Some had asked permission to bring up the subject: *Am I allowed to say anything?* (James). Others had avoided mentioning discrimination when given opportunities in the interview until directly confronted with it at the end, when they expressed strong views. When asked to judge the fairness of their own chances they went very quiet. Perhaps the situation of the interviews in places in schools that were not totally private, for example in the school hall, added to participants’ inhibitions. The parents, who were interviewed in their own homes, were sometimes apologetic but on the whole more forthcoming in expressing their views. For the youngsters, to a greater extent than their parents, ‘equal opportunities’ rhetoric was the socially acceptable ideology of the school but the acknowledgement of racism had been pushed under the table.

The black Caribbean boys, then, were subject to contradictory messages: equality of opportunity, which makes it meaningful to acquire educational credentials, versus discrimination, which renders qualifications less useful. I suggest that, as a result, they experienced psychological ambivalence which tended to stifle their motivation.

**4. Lack of explanation for low motivation**

Neither the boys nor their parents could offer an explanation for boys’ low motivation. The parents were frequently exasperated, as were their teachers. The boys and their parents did not say that the existence of discrimination caused the low motivation, indeed some parents saw discrimination as a reason for their sons needing superior qualifications. And yet this did not result in the boys becoming more motivated (as it may have for black Caribbean girls or Asians). Again, the concept of ambivalence is brought to mind.

Having described the motivation and perceptions of discrimination held by the boys as individuals, I now look at the influences of significant others in their lives: parents, teachers and peers.

**5. Social influences**

Pairs of items were embedded within the motivation scale to enquire into pupils’ perceptions of the pressure they experienced from their parents, teachers and peers. Graph 4 shows the mean scores on these motivational influence variables for boys by ethnic group, on scales of 1 to 4. Black Caribbean boys experienced greater (positive) parental pressure and greater (negative) peer pressure than the other boys did, but lower teacher expectations.
Motivational influences by ethnic group

Boys only

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Parental Pressure</th>
<th>Teacher Expectations</th>
<th>Peer Pressure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Caribbean</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaican</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A one-way ANOVA showed that there were significant differences at the 1% level on each of these variables among the groups. A Tukey post hoc test revealed that the differences between black Caribbean boys and each of the other groups were statistically significant for the peer pressure variable, showing that they were more likely to feel that their peers would respect them for messing about in class. The lower parental pressure experienced by the white boys than the black Caribbean, Indian or Jamaican boys was statistically significant. And the lower teacher expectations as seen by the black Caribbean boys, were significantly different from those of the Indian and Jamaican, but not of the white, boys.

Black Caribbean boys were therefore more subject to conflicting influences on their motivation than were the boys of other ethnic groups. There was a greater gap between the pressure of parents and the expectations of teachers for the Caribbean boys than for the other groups; and a greater (negative) peer pressure on them. Thus they experienced conflicting pressures, with parents pushing them to do well, peers urging them to mess about, and relatively low expectations from their teachers. These findings indicate ambivalence at the level of social interaction.

The interviews reinforced the findings of the questionnaire. Parents of boys were active in trying to motivate their sons, in supervising homework and in liaising with the school to ensure that work was done. James said of his mother, for example: *She used to get letters home saying how rude I was and then my mum sat me down and gave me a hard talking. She’d say things like ‘you gotta do well’ if I want to make it as a football player. And Mark’s mother: I tell him that you can’t afford to mess about, you’ve got to try and do better....But teenagers, they don’t want to listen to what their parents say.*

The role of teacher expectations was important in improving the boys’ motivation. For Joseph, *Mr N says he knows that I can do better, and that I should get my act together;* while for Alton, *(The headmaster) says, ‘You’ve got potential, I don’t want to see you*
waste it.’ So therefore, that’s what he needs to do to get you going. On the other hand, awareness of low expectations could perpetuate low motivation. For example, Royston said that if he made less effort others would not be surprised because: I think they would just expect me to work less.

Some of the boys, in the comprehensive schools, described how peer pressure made it harder for them to work. James saw it as a problem that he was: getting distracted by my friends in class, cos I’d rather just work by myself. Sometimes when I work and we go out like lunchtime now they go ‘Aah, I was working and all that.’ Like some of them don’t work. They go a town and all my friends and that are ‘Aah he’s working like a good boy!’ And yet the boys felt that they had a choice of which classmates to associate with so their motivation was not completely determined by their peers’ influence. James again: Some of my friends was telling me not to work and like my other friends were saying ‘Aah, don’t listen to them, just work, it’s them who’s not going to have a good education when they leave school.’ And I left them and I stayed with my other friend. Having the self confidence to stand up to peer pressure was seen by some as a matter of increased maturity, for instance Ricardo: When you get to a certain stage, you find that we’re more mature, and we don’t really care about what other people think.

Some parents had struggled to counteract the negative peer pressure on their sons. Joseph’s mother blamed his deteriorating behaviour on their move to their current location: His association with boys in this area. There are more boys in this area that are more interested in doing naughty things, getting into trouble than they are in buckling down and concentrating on their education. She had to confront the boys: ‘Why do you call here so often for Joseph? I’m going to get you lot banned!’ Yet she had to admit that: Some of the mums are in the same situation as me. There’s no father at home, the lads are out of control and they’re struggling with the same kind of thing as me.

The interviews gave vivid reality to the drier quantitative findings of the questionnaire in confirming the sometimes intense conflicts of influence upon the boys. To sum up, the questionnaires and interviews together painted a picture of contradictions within black Caribbean boys’ motivation, uncertainty in their views of the discrimination they may face in the workplace, and of conflicting social influences on their motivation.

Discussion

The evidence presented from the questionnaire and interview analyses has pointed to the concept of ambivalence as being more apposite than rational choice in explaining the low academic motivation of black Caribbean boys in a British city. The disjuncture between their positive attitude but poorly motivated behaviour, their strong but suppressed perceptions of racial discrimination in employment, their inability to explain their low motivation, and their experience of conflicting social pressures from parents, teachers and peers, all lean towards this interpretation. Weigert’s portrait of ambivalence in motivation resulting in blocked decisions and inhibited actions fitted these boys. Far from following a logical, planned path, they seemed to be caught in a web of contradictions that stifled their motivation.

In this way, the black Caribbean boys bore more resemblance to the black Americans described by Ogbu (1991), Mickelson (1990) and McWhorter (2000) that to the Jamaicans described by Miller. The Jamaican boys (in this study) showed greater consistency between their attitude and behaviour and also experienced greater consistency in the influences of parents, teachers and peers, resulting in a high level of motivation overall.
However, the black Americans showed a contradiction between their positive attitudes and less motivated behaviour, suggesting ambivalence. I think that Smelser’s idea, that ambivalence characterises actions in a situation of domination while rational choice characterises actions where there is greater freedom, is relevant here. It suggests to me that the motivational pattern of black boys in Birmingham, like those in the USA, resulted from their position in a white dominated society, whereas the Jamaican boys did not display this ambivalence because they were living in a society where white dominance had largely disappeared.

There is reason to believe that black males suffer particular discrimination in access to middle class employment, based on Census data (Peach 1996) and in the views of the parents in my sample. Thus black males may indeed suffer from a particularly high level of racial oppression. Within the structure of racial dominance, one of the sites of the front line of conflict may be the school, as testified by the conflictual relations between black boys and white teachers (Mac an Ghaill 1988, Sewell 1997). Within this relationship we may see the wider racial struggle being played out.

In fact, as my findings reveal, it is more complicated than that for the black boy. He is caught in the interplay of influences from three disparate and often conflicting groups who have little constructive communication with one another. The school, with its predominantly white staff and curriculum, wittingly or unwittingly embodies the power of the white British establishment to establish its own norms of behaviour and culture. The black peer group contests this power relationship through various mechanisms of resistance, such as displays of counter-cultural identity and non-compliant behaviour. Black parents, often alienated from the school but desiring their sons’ success, engage in tactics to push their children and to minimise the negative influence of their peers. They embody the high aspirations of the Caribbean immigrant, modified by awareness of discrimination in their own lives. These contradictory influences arise from tensions in the social structure and are experienced as ambivalence within the motivation of black boys.

The ambivalent situation of black Caribbean males is also complicated by historical and international contexts. Their fathers and grandfathers experienced occupational discrimination within the West Midlands industrial scene from the 1950s and excessive unemployment in times of recession, such as in the 1980s. With a long history of slavery and colonialism, Caribbean immigrants brought with them a sensitivity to oppression and, perhaps, a gender differentiated response to it. The parents of these boys would have experienced a degree of racism within the British school system though this seems to have been greatly reduced in the current generation. Thus the present research gives a snapshot at one point in time of a situation with a burden of history behind it. In addition, the contemporary influence of American hip-hop in promoting a youth culture of resistance demonstrates that peer culture cannot be seen as purely local but that it has international connections. Racial conflict in the U.S. affects the British scene.

The black Caribbeans in my study experienced a contradiction at the ideological level between the official belief in equality of opportunity and the perceived reality of occupational discrimination, like that described by Dench (1986) in the US. The belief of the dominant group, teachers for example, in the official line, was difficult for the young people to contest. On the other hand, their belief that they would be likely to face severe discrimination if they tried for mainstream professional jobs was one that they held but that it was not socially acceptable to admit. This helped to fuel ambivalence within their motivation.
I suggest that the concept of ambivalence is useful because it links the contradictions within black Caribbean boys’ motivation to their position in British social structure. Ambivalence acted at multiple levels: at the level of social structure; at the level of social interaction between the boys and significant others, at the ideological level of beliefs about the fairness of society; and at the level of the boys’ individual motivation.

**Implications for the future**

Current measures to reduce racial discrimination in employment (e.g. Race Relations Amendment Act 2000) and to promote equality of educational opportunity could make it a time of rapid change in the situation of black males in British society. But changes in the law do not immediately lead to changes the racial attitudes of white employers or teachers, neither do they immediately change the perceptions and behaviour of young black men. The cautious and sceptical response of the boys and their parents to ‘equal opportunities’ bears this out. In the short term at least, the contradiction between ostensible equality and perceived discrimination could become even more acute.

The ambivalence experienced by black boys in my study did not seem to be leading to social change, in contrast to the suggestion of Connidis & McMullin (2002). Rather it was the black girls, who did not show the same ambivalence as the boys, whose ‘proactive’ response to perceived discrimination seemed to be aimed at changing their social position. The boys’ ambivalence seemed to result in a degree of inertia which perhaps served to reinforce the low expectations and negative image held of them by white society.

**Conclusion**

The concept of ambivalence has proved useful in explaining aspects of black boys’ paradoxical educational behaviour and linking it to their situation at the front line of conflict within the wider social structure. Consistencies between the levels of explanation tend to make the ambivalence concept more persuasive. The disjuncture between boys’ attitudes and behaviour was mirrored in ideological contradictions between equal opportunities discourse and the perceived reality of unequal chances; these conflicts of ideology were mediated by the social influences of teachers, parents and peers; and the face-to-face interaction of black boys with these others, often interactions of conflict, could be seen as constituting social structural conflicts between dominant white and subordinate black groups.

This type of explanation shifts the focus away from finding shortcomings within black boys themselves and sees their predicament as structurally created, thereby counteracting ‘deficit’ explanations for their poor performance. The weakened motivation and blocked decisions shown by these boys resulted, not from personal inadequacy, but from their state of psychological ambivalence. I believe that ways forward for black Caribbean boys in British schools must involve finding ways of resolving this ambivalence.

**Bibliography**


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