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Masculinised Discourses within Education and the Construction of Black Male Identities amongst African Caribbean Youth

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ABSTRACT   *Boys in general, and Black boys in particular, are being excluded from school in ever increasing and disproportionate numbers, drawing attention to the need for a closer examination of the interrelationship between 'race' and gender. Clearly, young Black masculinities are not expressed in isolation, but are, amongst other influences, informed and shaped by school processes. Within schools, the ways in which masculinities are portrayed plays a major part in the relationships that exist between Black males and their peers and teachers. Thus, the experiences of Black pupils in school are mediated through their gendered identities. This paper discusses such experiences through the findings of a recently completed study of school exclusions and educational performance, in which young excludees have been interviewed and ethnographic school research conducted. The study explores the nature of 'excluded' identities by looking at how processes of exclusion act to position young Black males within discourses of conflict, alienation and cultural misunderstanding. The findings suggest that: (i) young Black men are positioned ambivalently by White teachers and male peers resulting in less positive perceptions of their masculinities; (ii) expressions of Black masculinity should not be interpreted as misdirected responses to an inability to attain specific White masculinities; (iii) the views of the young male excludees challenge differential treatment and damaging stereotypes and warn against 'over masculinising' the identities of young Black boys; and (iv) restricting discussion of the problematic nature of relationships between Black males and White teachers and male peers, with respect to expressions of masculinity, can act to pathologise Black identities and suggest that Black youth are themselves responsible for their own positioning.*

Introduction

There has been increasing media and academic concern surrounding increases in exclusion from school, and in particular the exclusions of Black male students. There exists a multitude of theories as to why young Black males are disproportionately represented in the official statistics for students permanently excluded from school. These include analyses of the effects of recent educational policies (the 1988 Education Reform

Act has been cited regularly) (Stirling, 1992, 1996; Blyth & Milner, 1993) on constructing particular racial and class specific groups of pupils as unmarketable (Lloyd-Smith, 1993; Bourne *et al.*, 1994). Other explanations have pointed to the particular expressions of masculinity by young Black males, which are often situated within forms of Black cultural production and exacerbate conflict between young Black males and White teachers (Sewell, 1995; Blyth & Milner, 1996). This paper will explore the extent to which school processes themselves inform and shape differing forms of masculinity through arguing that Black masculinities are not expressed in isolation. It will look at ways in which the masculinities of Black males who are excluded from school are constructed, drawing upon findings from a recently completed study exploring school exclusions and educational performance. This study is based on research conducted with young people who have experienced both fixed period and permanent exclusions from secondary school as well as ethnographic research within five schools situated in the inner-city of one local education authority. The paper will include testimonies taken from in-depth interviews with African Caribbean and mixed parentage male excludees and their parents.

Masculinising 'Race'

Much research has documented the nature of conflictual relationships between Black pupils and White teachers (Wright, 1985; Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Gillborn, 1990). However, it is important to recognise that these educational experiences are not predicted solely upon 'race' (Connolly, 1995). It has long been documented by Black feminists that the conceptual categories of 'race' and gender require disappropriating in view of the way that Black women are positioned within them (Hooks, 1991; Bhavnani & Phoenix, 1994). Following from this it is necessary to understand the differentiated ways that males and females experience racism, though at the same time acknowledging that racialised identities are highly gendered. As Black has argued:

> . . . racist common sense is not "gender blind". But equally, the experience of racism is not always gender specific. In this way racist discourse differentiates between gendered black subjects and at the same time unifies them in racialised social groupings. (1996, p. 178)

The gendered nature of these identities is particularly pronounced within education, especially in view of the higher rates of academic achievement of African Caribbean girls in relation to the lower rates of achievement among African Caribbean boys (Driver, 1980; Mirza, 1992). The underachievement of young Black males has been stereotypically attributed to pathological aspects of Caribbean culture and family life, something which leads Black individuals, regardless of age, to act in aggressive and challenging ways. On the other hand, the high achievement of Black females has alternatively been seen as a result of strong matriarchal roles existent within female headed African Caribbean families. These explanations overlook the structural basis of racism and the individual ways in which Black males and females respond to education. Clearly the experiences of Black pupils in school are mediated through their gendered identities, and it will be argued that the way masculinity is portrayed within schools plays a large part in the relationships that exist between Black males, their peers and teachers. However, though young males (regardless of racial background) experience disproportionate exlusions from school, the fact that young African Caribbean males are between four and five times more likely to be excluded than any other group (Gillborn & Gipps, 1996) indicates that their schooling experiences are mediated through more than simply

masculinity. Any discussion of the education of African Caribbean males in schools must not be reduced to that of 'gendered exclusivity'. Though we will build on the gradually increasing work on Black schooling masculinity (Sewell, 1995, 1997; Mac an Ghaill, 1995), we shall depart from it through arguing for a more thorough interrelating of the effects of 'race' and gender. We shall also suggest that it is important to move away from theorising masculinities as a form of 'machismo' which is quite clearly racialised, as to do so may only pathologise the very different ways that young Black males respond to their experiences in school.

An Ethos of Masculinity

Feminist researchers on the reproduction of gender divisions within education have focused on the implicit and explicit forms of masculinity which exist within schools (Stanworth, 1983; Davies, 1984). The ways in which specific 'disciplined knowledge' has, in the past, been constructed as gendered is not the only way that gender is reproduced within this sphere, as this aspect of researching gender often focused more on the need to integrate girls into technical and science subjects, than on the way boys take up masculine identities (Connell, 1987). However, feminist research did reveal an ethos within education which promoted qualities of individualism, competitiveness and differentiation, and this ethos has been theorised as masculine (Askew & Ross, 1988). If young females are conceptualised as oriented towards personal relationships and males towards structures and role differentiation, then the basic principles of education (and practices) within schools are at odds with the social orientation of girls, favouring instead the ways that boys in general are socialised. Additionally, the processes by which achievement is measured through the comparison of one child with another fosters forms of competitiveness, often aggressive, which coincide not only with young male social orientation, but also the 'technical-limited rationality' seen to dominate the market place (Ohrn, 1993, p. 148). The important work of feminist researchers in education has highlighted (and in many ways helped to address) the educational performances of young women in schools, such that increasing educational achievements of girls in comparison to boys can be seen as evidence of this (Gillborn & Gipps, 1996). However, work on schooling masculinities also attempts to explore how schools contribute to the formation of varied male identities (Connell, 1989; Mac an Ghaill, 1995; Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 1996). This is an important exercise given research which points to the increasing exclusions of boys from both primary and secondary schools (Parsons, 1995) The experiences of boys in schools further illustrates that the various masculine identities which schools construct are not all valued on a similar scale. For example, it has been suggested that the masculinities which are approved and legitimated within the educational sphere provide access to higher education and professionalism. Not all boys are given equal access to this provision and the masculine identity this affords. Definitions of masculinity within education then tend to be based upon binary oppositions of success/failure which are both class and race specific. As Connell (1989) argues:

> streaming and "failure" push groups of working class boys towards alienation, and state authority provides them a perfect foil for the construction of a combative dominance focused masculinity. (1989, p. 300)

Thus, the masculinities of young working-class and Black males come into conflict with those of White male teaching staff, and young middle-class male pupils (Mac an Ghaill, 1995). The dominant, or hegemonic, definition of masculinity within schools is based on

the high status curriculum, and the introduction of 'hard, lean' market forces (Metcalf & Humphries, 1985, p. 11) in education policy to further institutionalise increased competition. Much of this has been described as the New Right's attempt to 'remasculinise' the teaching profession and the education system (Mac an Ghaill, 1995). Working-class and Black male pupils fall foul of these dominant definitions of schooling masculinity through their representation as academic failures. They then take up different expressions of masculinity in order to find other forms of power. Connell (1987) suggests this may be in the shape of 'sporting prowess, physical aggression, sexual conquest' (Connell, 1987, p. 292). These explanations of marginalised schooling masculinities are similar to those theories which explore the effects of non-access to high status (racial, gendered and sexual) identities, and are replicated in theories of Black masculinity as discussed below (Staples, 1982; Mercer & Julien, 1988).

   Clearly then, specific notions of masculinity around academic success are legitimated in schools, but this does not mean that the other forms of masculinity taken up by less academically successful boys are subsequently seen as *illegitimate*. They become *less* legitimate, and other forms of power, such as the aggression, but most particularly, the sporting prowess as described by Connell (1987), emerge as more acceptable. However, the level of this negotiated acceptance is both class and race specific and it is here that we would argue for work on schooling masculinity to include a clearer integrated 'race' analysis in order to account for young Black male experience. As Connell's (1987, 1989) work on schooling masculinities suggests, not all male pupil identities have equal validity. That 'dominant' masculinities underwrite educational policies and, subsequently, some teacher perception, suggests that masculinity, in whichever form, will have more status than femininity in schools. For young Black males, however, the alternative masculinities which they adopt in schools have less validity than their White working-class peers. Important questions arise, therefore, as to why such conflict exists between Black male masculinities and those legitimised within schools which, though also affecting white working-class males, lead to the disproportionate representation of Black males in statistics relating to exclusion; and also lead Black males to be positioned by teachers, White male peers and themselves, as highly aggressive and sexualised.

Black Masculinity

The concept of Black masculinity has been used by education theorists (Mac an Ghaill, 1995; Sewell, 1995, 1997), by Black Feminists (Wallace, 1978; Hooks, 1991) and by Black male academics (Staples, 1982; Mercer & Julien, 1988; West, 1993) to account for the experiences of young Black male pupils and their expression of 'machismo'. These discussions have often focused on the sexism, aggression and violence of Black males. Not only does this reinforce stereotypes but it also leads to a homogenous image of Black masculinity. This research has suggested that Black men, in being denied access to the attributes of White male power, seek to reinvent identities which involve exerting power over others. For example, Mercer & Julien (1988) have argued that the attempt by Black males to incorporate dominant definitions of masculinity result in the expression of machismo which 'subjectively incorporates attributes associated with dominant definitions of manhood—such as being tough, in control, independent—in order to recuperate some degree of power or active influence over objective conditions of powerlessness creaed by racism' (1988, p. 113). Others see the attempt by Black males to redefine manhood in relation to dominant definitions of masculinity as 'mythical' (Wallace, 1978; Hooks, 1991). This myth of masculinity manifests itself in forms that are

'oppressive to Black women, children and indeed, to Black men themselves as it can entail self-destructive acts and attitudes' (Mercer & Julien, 1988, p. 143). The construction of Black masculinity acts both to ensure that dominant definitions of Black males are maintained and also to reinforce dominant symbols of masculinity such as control over women.

However, Sewell (1995), writing on the forms of Black masculinity expressed by male youth in school, criticises the ways in which writers on this theme have tended to position Black males as excluded from the dominant positions of men within patriarchy, which leads them to reinvent violent, hypersexualised forms of masculinity (1995, p. 23). He suggests that '. . . [what] has not been documented are the many different types of Black males who do not feel a need to mimic White patriarchy' (Sewell, 1995, p. 23). Research on Black masculinity has indeed portrayed Black males as 'cut off' from patriarchy, in similar ways to earlier research on Black identity, which positioned Black individuals— both male and female—as pathological victims who desire, yet cannot achieve, White- ness (Mama, 1995). It is as problematic to theorise Black masculinity as constituted by aggression, sexism and violence, arising from exclusion from White masculinity, as it is to construct Black femininities as constituting images of matriarchs, Jezebels and mammies where they too are excluded from dominant defintions of womanhood (Collins, 1990). Hooks raises a pertinent question, '. . . [why] is black male sexism evoked as though it is a special brand of this social disorder, more dangerous, more abhorrent and life threatening than the sexism that pervades the culture as a whole, or the sexism that informs White male domination of women?' (Hooks, 1991, p. 62). Though it is important to situate the educational experiences of African Caribbean males within an analysis of the interrelation between 'race' and masculinity, there is always the danger that this will reduce the problems experienced by some young Black males in schools simply to the way in which they express masculinities.

It is, of course, necessary to explore the processes through which young Black males experience their schooling identities when their relationships with others become predicated upon assumptions about the nature of Black masculinity. It is also important to acknowledge that the way masculinities are responded to, and often lived out in schools, is 'race' specific. Black masculinities are subject to not only symbolic exclusion from the power and status associated with White masculinity, but young Black men also experience institutional exclusion through their disproportionate representation in school exclusion figures. We would like to explore the nature of these symbolic and material 'excluded' identities by looking at the way processes of exclusion act to position young Black males within discourses of conflict, alienation and cultural misunderstanding. These representatives are used not only by some members of school teaching staff, but also by the White male peers who seek to define and emulate indicators of what they perceive to be Black masculinity. Sewell (1997) and Mac an Ghaill (1995) have suggested that how young Black males are responded to in schools is ultimately through wider understanding of Black masculinity. Although masculine stereotypes of aggression and confrontation are inscribed upon the identities of both young Black and White working-class boys, and young Black female pupils have also been subject to similar definitions (Fuller, 1982; Mirza, 1992; Weekes & Wright, 1997), it is 'race' which determines how gender is experienced.

In fact, our research highlighted that young Black men were positioned ambivalently by White teachers and male peers. As work on Black masculinity has suggested, the relationships between Black and White males are often imbued with envy, threat and confrontation (Mac an Ghaill, 1995; Back, 1996; Sewell, 1997). Ambivalent definitions

of Black men arise through, on the one hand, exoticising Black men for sporting prowess, musical ability and representations of style, whilst simultaneously criminalising these attributes. These complex understandings of Black masculinity informed the experiences of the young men we interviewed. The central issue is that these young men perceived that their masculinities were not as acceptable (or legitimated) as those of their White male peers. These differences in experience were linked to the way they often felt defined as occupying confrontational and social roles.

David, aged 17, was permanently excluded from his secondary school in the middle of his educational career. He had learning difficulties and his reading age was particularly low. He felt bitter about the lack of assistance he had received from teachers because of low teacher expectations:

> *Researcher:* What about your relationships with your teachers? Were they the same or different from White children?
>
> *David:*   Different in terms of the way they talk to them. Because most of the lessons, the White kids can get up and walk round. Me, if I get up "sit down!" it's "sit down" all the time. Like if I was gonna go and damage things or nick something. In lessons a lad would put his hand up [teacher] go to him straight away. I would have to sit there for about half an hour [saying] "yeah sir!" "One minute!" "Sir!" "One minute" Then it used to get me wound up. I'd say fair enough, forget you. I'd just fling it [my work] and say I'm not doing it . . . Cos at school . . . they don't listen, unless you're White. And I get mad.
>
>   (*David*, mixed parentage, aged 17)

David felt that he had been responded to not only because of the suspicion around his reasons for moving in the classroom but also because a request for help had become redefined as an indication of confrontation:

> *Heather:*   Didn't they have a policy where you got . . . your name or crosses on the board? They [teachers] would put your name three times on the board and if you got three (crosses) you got a detention. And he [David] used to come home and say "I got a detention". I'd say "what for?" [He'd say] "I put my hand up and said to the teacher, 'Sir, Sir'". They'd put his name on the board.
>
>   (*Heather*, mother of David, mixed parentage)

In this case the differential social reaction to him which David had experienced led to a confrontational situation. Other excludees complained of similar forms of differential treatment in classrooms which when opposed would again lead to confrontation. One young male, permanently excluded after retaliating to a bullying incident, also complained of experiencing differential treatment. Although his relationships with his teachers were not initially based upon confrontation as he was achieving very well in school, after experiencing occasional negative responses from new teachers when he changed school, his opinion of the staff changed:

> When I got there [to school] I got there in the late part of the year. The top maths class was full. There's a girl called Margaret, her mum and dad were governors at the school and everyone used to know she was the cleverest girl in the school. Everyone used to rush around her desk [for answers] and then

> people used to come around my desk. One time the maths teacher asked
> Margaret "Margaret, what's the answer? You're gonna get it right, but do you
> know this?" She [says] "No, why don't you ask Nicholas?" He just looked [at
> me] and he goes "No, it's alright" and he did it [the answer] on the board. I
> couldn't get in top Maths group. I used to think he was kind of a racist teacher
> really.
>
> *(Nicholas,* African Caribbean, aged 17)

Clearly, the young Black males recognised that the relationships that they had with their
teachers in comparison with those experienced by their White peers, would enable
specific interactions of theirs to be perceived or constructed as confrontational. Although
the interaction between Nicholas and his maths teacher did not take place within a
context of confrontation, Nicholas felt that a differential teacher response, based on his
racial background, had increasingly taken place. Gillborn (1988, 1990) has outlined that
White children in schools often acknowledge that Black children receive different forms
of attention from teachers, and other writers detail the recognition by some White
teachers that Black children are often labelled as troublesome (Wright, 1985, 1992; Mac
an Ghaill, 1988). Less surprisingly perhaps, Sewell (1995) has documented the acknowl-
edgement by Black males that there is a difference between the ways that they and their
White male counterparts may respond to teacher construction. However, as Connolly
(1995) has argued, the confrontations that Black males may experience in schools are not
restricted to that which takes place with teachers but also extend to the wider peer group.
As Mac an Ghaill (1995) has noted, dominant discourses of Black masculinity influence
other peers as well as teachers. His research on school masculinities highlights the inter-
and intra-racial conflict subsumed within the contexts of identification, desire and envy
among young men in school peer groups (Mac an Ghaill, 1995). White male pupils, both
working class and middle class, constructed African Caribbean boys as highly aggressive.
In turn, the African Caribbean males responded to this positioning by emphasising their
stylistic superiority over other groups. The forms of Black masculinity contained within
the media (the recent portrayal of the athlete Linford Christie illustrated the ways that
Black male sporting prowess can be reduced to sexualised stereotype) and promulgated
within types of Black popular music, do transmit gendered imagery to young Black males
and females. Additionally, the mass consumption of African American rap and R'n'B
music by White youth and their processes of emulating Black (male in particular) styles
of walking and talking, position Black males further into discourses of machismo. In view
of the way Black men are constructed, it is problematic to suggest that expressions of
Black masculinity are simply misdirected responses to their inability to attain specific
White masculinities. For example, Mitchell, a 16-year-old African Caribbean pupil
permanently excluded for 'disruptive' behaviour, illustrates how White peers have
positioned him within specific criminalised discourses of Black masculinity in similar ways
to teachers:

> *Mitchell:*   I think that white kids act worse [than Black kids] 'cause that kid
>   that threw the football at the teacher was a White kid . . . White kids
>   tend to look up to Black kids because they think that they're all bad,
>   they all do robberies . . . They do things to impress us. That's why
>   Lee did it, cos he was trying to impress me. He goes "watch, watch
>   this, watch this" And then he did it. I was laughing.
>
> *Researcher:* How do you respond to that?

> *Mitchell:*   I think they're bonkers! What they doing that for, getting themselves
> into trouble just to make me laugh? . . . respect them, but you're
> mad. 'Cause I won't be doing it for them. No way.
>
> (*Mitchell*, African Caribbean, 16)

Luckily Mitchell's response to his positioning within these stereotypical discourses is simply to reject them in order to create new definitions of Black masculinity, although unfortunately the ability of young Black men to create new masculinities is restricted. Neither does the process of symbolically elevating and/or emulating young Black men necessarily give them a more privileged place on the hierarchy of pupil identities. As a result of the actions of Mitchell's White peer, Lee, Mitchell was excluded from the classroom and told to spend four days in the school's on site unit. Lee received no sanction until he returned to school four days after the incident and admitted he had thrown the 'fireball'. Similarly Johnny, aged 16, recognised that the relationship he had with his White male form tutor was based on fear. Initially he perceived this as avantageous and felt that in some way he was being elevated by his teacher. However, as with Mitchell, he recognised the consequences of this form of positioning:

> A lot of teachers, sometimes they're scared of Black boys. My form tutor was
> scared of me, you could tell. I was probably big for my age and . . . he wouldn't
> tell me to sit down and take my jacket off. He'd wait till I'd do it. He wouldn't
> ask for homework. If he told me something and I disagreed with it, he'd back
> down straight away. And I took that to my advantage. Over here, every Black
> person is a 'rude boy', if they dress a certain way. That's how they [teachers]
> see them. Because when I came here I had long plaits and I kept hearing
> people say to me "oh he's a rude boy". So I cut it all off. Just to give me a new
> image and start afresh.
>
> (*Johnny*, African Caribbean, aged 16)

The teacher's fear of Johnny has led to his exclusion from learning, as the teacher would not ask him for homework, neither would he be challenged if he had said something incorrectly. Johnny recognised that he was reinforcing specific racial and gendered stereotypes and, in doing so, was merely contributing to a general process of his own exclusion. It is unfortunate that not all young Black men who are subject to these processes of Black male identity construction are given the space to distance themselves in similar ways. However, even where young Black males are able to distance themselves from these processes, the coping strategies they employ to avoid stereotyping and conflict can still be detrimental to their own identities (Gillborn, 1990).

A Conflict of Masculinities

It is important at this stage to identify the ways that 'race' and gender discourses filtered into the accounts these young men gave for their schooling experiences. It is noticeable that Mitchell referred above to the way he was positioned by his White male friend's stereotypes of Black masculinity. As differentiation of response to Black and White pupils by teachers formed the main description of the respondents' schooling experience, it is interesting that only occasionally was this experience spoken of in gendered ways. However, the young men were aware that differences existed on both an inter- and intra-racial level. Thus, though both Nicholas and David have spoken of a monolithic Black pupil who would be ignored in classrooms and excluded from learning because of

this, the context of confrontation which may emerge out of differential treatment became instantly gendered. For example, Adam, aged 15, had been permanently excluded twice, once from primary school and once from secondary school. The excluded identity which emerged from his experiences of different schools was the differential treatment he experienced in the classroom which would lead to him being excluded from lessons:

> *Researcher:* What sort of things would make you angry at school?
>
> *Adam:* When I get blamed for something what I didn't do . . . Say something went off, [it's] directly me they would come and see, even if it weren't me.
>
> *Researcher:* What would you do?
>
> *Adam:* Try and tell 'em it's not me but they wouldn't listen, they would just tell me to just "sssh!" . . . [and] mainly right, you always see Black boys getting detention. Guaranteed, if you look in the [detention] book, you see there's loads. You'll see about four White guys . . .
>
> (*Adam*, mixed parentage, aged 15)

Adam recognised that being treated differentially in the classroom from other pupils may, in a similar way to David, lead to a confrontation and some form of school sanction. What is also important is that he has recognised that the process is heavily racialised and does not differentiate by gender initially. However, his remarks on the large numbers of Black males present at detentions illustrates that there is a gendered dimension to the process he has experienced. Therefore, the concept of both differentiation and confrontation for these young males is associated with their racial and gendered backgrounds. It is also associated with varying processes of symbolic and institutional exclusion. However, it is clear that specific racial stereotypes affected the way the masculinities of these young men were perceived as conflictual. For example, Bernadette's son Shante had received numerous fixed term exclusions from school and she felt that the school encouraged far too readily his inclusion into sporting activity:

> To me they not supporting him in his education, his academic education. Sports, they're quick fe do anything for him and to me personally, me tell him already "me never bring you in the world fe kill out yourself run for neither no school, nor country, no nothing, right?"
>
> (*Bernadette*, mother of Shante, aged 14)

Thus the perception on the part of teaching staff that Black schooling masculinities embody aggression/confrontation, may lead to a desire to channel these presumed and negative characteristics into pursuits believed to be more *positive*. For example, the father of a Black male pupil excluded for fighting from one school suggests that his son was responded to by the teachers of his second school in the following ways:

> *Trevor:* With some of the sports teachers, because of his size, they wanted him to play sport but he wasn't having that. Nicholas said . . . I don't need to prove myself to you, so some of them actually did not talk to him . . . they would ignore him. If they were going down the corridor, eyes to face, they would ignore him, they would turn their heads . . . and then when I brought that to the school to say well this is not a healthy environment, it's supposed to be about education and social life is a massive part of it, teachers denied it. 'Cause a lot

of them were afraid of him because he left the school, being, you
know, a fighter . . . and they probably felt threatened by him, so they
put him down in other ways . . . and because he wasn't using his size
to play rugby for the school, or football or basketball. He wasn't any
good. It could just be a general misconception about Black men,
that we're violent.

(*Father of Nicholas*, African Caribbean, 17)

Where the other (more subordinate) masculinities encouraged within schools embody the
competitiveness and aggression supposedly channelled into sport, they become more
acceptable. However the masculinities of young Black men who actively refuse to take
part in one aspect of schooling identity (i.e. the playing of team sports) because they are
excluded from taking part in other more academic aspects, have no place within the
hierarchies of masculinity within schools. Thus, where other subordinate schooling
masculinities have been theorised as more legitimate than the identities of female pupils
and teachers (Mac an Ghaill, 1995), it is clear that 'race' acts to position Black
masculinities as illegitimate, rather than merely *subordinate*. It is on this basis that young
Black men find themselves excluded from the schooling process and distanced from the
definitions of various forms of (white) masculinity found there.

Conclusions

This paper has looked at the ways that the masculinities of young Black males are
constructed by others within the sphere of education. It has not attempted to explore the
construction and negotiation of masculinities within the peer groups of young Black men,
mostly because many of the young men in the sample had not remained in mainstream
schools long enough to forge peer group school relationships. Work on masculinities
within schooling has explored the expressions of some Black masculinities and the way
these can often embody exaggerated heterosexuality, aggression and confrontation, either
with peers or teachers. Restricting discussion of the problematic nature of relationships
between Black males and White teachers and male peers, to expressions of masculinity,
can act to pathologise their identities through suggesting that they are responsible for
their positioning. This does not deny that Black males may act in ways which require
school sanctions, but it does suggest that their experiences within education should not
differ from White peers and other Black females who also behave in similar ways. It is
important to note that Black male perception of differential teacher responses to them
and their schooling identities informs their subsequent relations with school staff. As one
young male who had experienced four permanent exclusions in his educational career
remarked 'it's [just] teachers don't have the right attitudes. They can be alright one time,
and then the next time [you see them] they just change. And when they change you start
to hate the worst in them and when they change [back] again, you don't like 'em at all'
(*Martin*, African Caribbean, aged 15).

We have shown that, in many cases, new definitions of masculinity are actively created
by young Black males; it is insufficient to argue that the masculinities which are
constructed from them are unproblematically taken on board. Young Black males do
recognise that others make assumptions about what constitutes Black masculinity, and in
acknowledging the stereotypical nature of these views, can reject them.

. . . most teachers have . . . I dunno what they have really but they think that
all Black people do is steal things especially . . . not all teachers, but a lot of

teachers, especially teenagers . . . the way that they act . . . you'll walk into a
classroom and the teacher'll have her purse on the desk or something, and then
she'll just put it in her drawer, or lock her drawer or something like that. Just
little mad moves that they do. Just mad. It's like when I walk down the road
and people put their door locks on, their central locking [They're] scared. I just
laugh I think they're mad, they're scared of little, little me? Alright, big me! But
I'm not gonna do anything. If I was gonna do something, then you should be
scared.

(*Mitchell*, African Caribbean, 16)

Black masculinities within schools are not restricted to confrontation and aggression, any
more so than other masculinities. All of the young Black men spoken to in the study
wished to achieve, but many, like Nicholas, who was never able to gain entry to the top
set in mathematics, found themselves placed in lower sets, on-site and pupil referral units,
because of behaviour and conflict with others. Previous research has shown that the
alienation which results from this process places young Black pupils in cycles of
confrontation and underachievement (Wright, 1986, 1992; Gillborn, 1990; Gillborn &
Gipps, 1996). As the respondents were constructed by others within the identity of
excludee, they were never able to move beyond the equation of Black masculinity with
conflict and confrontation. For some of these young men, their exclusion from dominant
definitions of masculinity and hence high status academic knowledge and power, did lead
to active reinventions of Black masculinity, but not necessarily in the form of sporting
prowess and heightened heterosexuality as suggested by some masculinity theorists
(Connell, 1987, 1989). It is clear that often these young men became locked in cycles of
exclusion, with many of them spending increasing periods in educational 'limbo' (Blyth
& Milner, 1993; Bourne *et al.*, 1994). However, the masculinities they developed, though
clearly being influenced by the way other peers and teachers stereotypically perceived
them, embodied a recognition of the undervaluing of Black masculinity. Where the
young men would respond to a teacher's ignoring their requests for assistance through
acting in ways which they perceived to be expected of them, these remained oppositional
acts. Thus, as Alexander notes:

Most studies have, however regarded Black masculinity as an *alternative* to social
status, rather than as an *extension* of it. 'Black macho' has been portrayed,
therefore, as differing in kind rather than degree from the wider gendered
power relations within Society at large . . . It is however, only within the
context of wider power relations—and as an extension of them—that Black
masculinity can be fully understood . . . Black masculinity is then perhaps best
understood as an articulated response to structural inequality, enacting and
subverting dominant definitions of power and control, rather than substituting
for them. Rather than a hostile and withdrawn entity [black masculinity] can
be seen as a base for interaction and negotiation with wider society.

(*Alexander*, 1996, pp. 136–137)

Though clearly there are problems with the ways in which some forms of Black male
behaviour act to reinforce stereotypes of Black masculinity, it is not a construct which
consists solely of Black male attempts to gain the privileges of hegemonic (White)
masculinities. To suggest that Black identities are constructed out of negativity because
they have failed to achieve Whiteness renders meaningless the attempts of young male
excludees to challenge the differential treatment to which they are subjected, generating

damaging stereotypes of Black male pupils as threatening, overtly stylistic and confrontational. Moving away from 'over-masculinising' the identities of young Black boys may be one way of avoiding this particular reductionist trap.

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