Sophie Baffour	"DOES THE POPULARITY OF BLACK CULTURE WITHIN MAINSTREAM CULTURE SIGNIFY A POSITIVE MOVE FORWARDS IN THE WAY THAT WE THINK ABOUT RACE?" The International Journal of Urban Labour and Leisure, 7(1) <http://www.ijull.co.uk/vol7/1/baffour.pdf>	

Abstract

This research project aims to consider the impact that the popularity of black culture within mainstream culture in recent years has on the way that we think about race. It considers the types of images of blacks that emerge from this popularity and the possible ways that both individual identities and perceptions of race can be influenced by these images. Through these considerations, it questions whether this popularity of black culture actually represents a positive advancement in the way that we think about race, or whether it just contributes to a maintenance of long-standing racial stereotypes. This project concludes with the findings that the main problem with the popularity of black culture lies in the lack of diversity and positive representations of blacks. It finds that this lack of diversity can encourage views of black culture that are narrow and stereotypical and can possibly lead to generalisations of innate racial differences, which can be reinforced by wider society. However, it also finds that the capacity of blacks and whites to appropriate, reject or critically evaluate and question the images they see should not be undermined, and that images projected through the mass media will not automatically have a detrimental effect on the way that we think about race.

Introduction

The research described in this report is an attempt to consider some of the implications of the commercial popularity of black culture, which has reached an all time high in recent years (Bynoe 2002, Cashmore 1997). The issue of culture in general is of great interest in sociology; debates surrounding what constitutes culture and how it affects our social and personal experiences are constantly circulating (Hall 1996, Hall, Neitz and Battani 2003). Similarly, issues around race and representation are also hotly contested arenas of debate, in terms of the types of representations of race, what they signify and how they affect us (Entman and Rojecki 2000, Hall 1997). Within areas that are both so broad and so contested there is a need to constantly assess and challenge existing literature and identify where gaps may lie.

During this research I have attempted to take the issue of 'black culture' and question its increasing popularity and marketability within mainstream culture. I have sought to determine the extent to which the increased popularity and visibility of black culture within the mainstream can actually be regarded as positive. As will become apparent throughout this research, I have attempted to move away from a notion of black culture as fixed and essential, and instead have concentrated on the

most prominent *images* of blacks and their 'way of life' that are represented within mainstream culture.

Within the sociological literature, there has been considerable writing on 'black culture' in its marketable form and also a substantial amount of work on identity, race and representation. However, I do not feel that these aspects have been adequately linked or explored in enough depth in relation to one another. My research therefore, is an attempt to link these two issues and consider the impact that this popularity or marketability of 'black culture' has on actual people - their perceptions experiences and understandings.

To meet these aims, this research has adopted a qualitative approach to explore the understandings and influences resulting from black cultural images and the way that these images are received and understood. Both black and white individuals were interviewed in the hopes of gaining a wider perspective into the impact of the popularity of black culture within mainstream culture.

Chapter one considers definitions of black culture and the ways that black culture has been exploited and marketed. It considers what is meant by the term 'commodified black culture' considering explanations regarding the marketability and successes of stereotypical images of blacks - particularly with a white audience. The example of rap music is used as an example of these issues. Consideration of where control of black cultural images lie, as well as consideration of the level of resistance to particular images or stereotypes that have arisen as a result, are also discussed.

Chapter two looks at the implications of racial stereotyping within a wider context, considering the various ways in which black culture has influenced Western culture and white identities and what this signifies. The way in which many aspects of Western culture maintain a 'racial hierarchy' which justifies inequality and difference and influences both black and white perceptions of race are also considered.

In chapter three, I discuss the methods of research employed, justifying why these methods were used, the factors that needed to be taken into account and the problems that arose while conducting this research. In chapter four, I relate the issues that arose through the literature with the real experiences and opinions of those interviewed. The research concludes with the consideration of the implications of the data found and offers suggestions for further studies.

Images of Black Culture

When examining the impact that the popularity of black culture has on the way that we think about race, a fundamental issue to be considered is the need for an actual definition of 'black culture'. Here caution is needed as Gilroy (1993) has argued, because 'black culture' is an ambiguous concept. All cultures are extremely diverse and complex; all cultures integrate and are influenced by other cultures and are twisted and modified under different social, historical and geographical contexts. Therefore, in considering this matter, we must avoid talking about black culture as though it were absolutely distinct from other cultures. Cashmore (1997) for instance, argues it is debatable whether an authentic black culture even exists. If race is a

mere social construct, then to talk about black culture (or white culture for that matter) in a simple and purified form - as a 'fact', as a distinct set of gifts, qualities and characteristics that 'belong' to either blacks or whites is both misleading and essentialising.

Overcoming this debate and the confusion surrounding whether or not we can talk of an 'authentic black culture', many theorists including those such as Yvonne Bynoe (2002), Ellis Cashmore (1997), Paul Gilroy (1993) and bell hooks (1992) have moved their focus to what they term 'commodified black culture'. This moves away from the essentialising tendencies of the black culture debate and instead focuses upon the way in which aspects commonly *considered* as being part of black culture - as characteristics of the 'way of life' associated with black people - have been mass-produced and marketed for consumption by a white audience. This definition allows us to explore the way these aspects have been shaped, produced, distributed and franchised into 'any shape that will turn a profit' (Cashmore1997: 2). It therefore refers to 'black culture' in its most saleable form. By examining black culture as a commodity, we are able to question the way black culture - and therefore black people- are represented within mainstream culture. In doing this, we consider the types of images that are most successfully consumed within mainstream society and the implications that the most prominent images may have on the way in which we think about race and the way that we understand 'black culture'.

In terms of the demand for black culture by mainstream society, it can be argued that its profit making capacity is higher than ever, particularly with a white audience. This is evident when we consider the entertainment industry. Dates and Barlow (1993) quote the vast success of BET (Black Entertainment Television) in America as a demonstration of this widespread demand for 'black culture'. Bynoe (2002) estimates that around 70 per cent of rap music owes its sales to white suburbia. As hooks (1992) observes, commodified black culture seems to be '*the spice that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture (1992:14)*. However, in questioning what this popularity of 'black culture' means, we need to ask the question 'what are the most prominent images of blacks and black culture that come across? We need to question the extent to which the images of black culture that are most visible or prominent within mainstream culture, actually represent a shift away from long standing racial stereotypes or whether they tend to just reinforce them.

A useful example that illustrates these issues lies in the consideration of rap music. As Cashmore (1997) argues, black music is synonymous with 'black culture'- it represents one of black cultures most recognisable and profitable forms. Rap music, which descends from the African oral tradition *'pattin' juba'*, is long associated with being an expression and reflection of black culture (Bynoe 2002: 90). Due to its soaring popularity in recent years, particularly with a white audience, it proves a useful aspect of 'black culture' to examine.

Yvonne Bynoe (2002) is critical of the representations of blacks and black culture that are prominent within the most commercially successful rap songs and the music videos that accompany them. She argues that although rap music helped give a voice to those who were once 'culturally invisible' (the black urban poor), and has the capacity to educate, enlighten and empower its audience, this has been compromised by the images promoted in what she terms 'commercial rap'.

According to Bynoe, 'commercial rap' refers to popular rap songs that perpetuate images that are *materialistic and libertine (2002:92).* The problem with the popularity of this kind of rap is that it is now coming to be regarded as representative of the whole of rap music (which in truth is extremely diverse) and the whole of black culture. Marketed to a predominantly white audience, commercial rappers, encouraged by their record executives, promote an image of a typical black American male:

> '…not as a complex, educated or even creative individual but as a 'real nigga' who has ducked bullets, worked a triple beam, and who has done at least one stint in prison' (2002:91).

These images, alongside images of sexually voracious, scantily clad black women (in both music videos and actual rap songs) become transmitted to the record buying public as *'a testament of who Black Americans are' (2002:91).* Bynoe argues that they invoke a one-dimensional image of black culture, which fails to convey the complexity and diversity of both rap music and black culture in general. Additionally, these one-dimensional images tie in with longstanding stereotypes of blacks that portray the males as phallocentric, misogynistic, violent and threatening (hooks 1992, 1994) and the females as promiscuous, untrustworthy and inferior (Cashmore 1997, Rose 1994).

So why are these particular images of blacks and black culture so profitable? And how can we explain the success of these images with a white audience? Murray offered a potential explanation when he argued: *'the black entertainer succeeds with the white audience by embodying an aspect of blackness with which that audience feels comfortable…' (Cited in Cashmore 1997: 79).* This argument is supported by Cashmore, who argues that the success of blacks within the entertainment industry is dependent upon the extent to which they conform to white stereotypes of blackness. These stereotypes promote an image of blacks as '*others'*, confirming innate racial differences - a sense of 'us and them' (Cashmore 1997:170). As hooks (1992) and Young (1995) observe fascination with and desire for the '*other',* for something that seems so different to the 'norm' is not a new phenomenon. The marketability of these types of images therefore, possibly lies in their confirmation of this sense of *otherness*, rather than reflecting a genuine appreciation for black culture. Quoting Samuels, Cashmore suggests that rap music is profitable because it allows whites to observe:

> '…a highly charged theatre of race in which white listeners became guilty eavesdroppers on the putative private conversation of the inner city' (cited in Cashmore 1997:170)

This 'eavesdropping' argues Cashmore, allows entrance to another world. Therefore the more excessive these tales of the urban poor, the more extreme the 'realities' of urban life are portrayed, then the more fascination they generate (Boyd 1997, hooks 1994). This makes it difficult for images that challenge these stereotypes or encourage a different way of thinking to get in the limelight.

In considering the above issues, it is worth questioning where control of these images lie. Those such as Cashmore (1997) and Dates and Barlow (1993) argue

that control of many of the most prominent images of black culture within the mass media lie mainly in the hands of predominantly white owned corporations. Over history, images of blacks have lain predominately in the hands of white image-makers who have tended to reproduce the *ideological hegemony of the dominant white culture (Dates and Barlow 1993:16)*. This means that images of blackness have been reproduced in a 'selective and simplified' way, which conforms to racial stereotypes and thus justifies inequality and difference (Merelman 1995). Many of the images of black culture prominent in the mainstream therefore, fail to provoke thought about existing black culture and instead reproduce the same pattern of thinking that has occurred over centuries. Therefore the success of blacks within the entertainment industry can be argued to be a dubious source of power or victory if it conforms to common conceptions of black culture that are narrow and stereotypical.

It is important to note however, that there has also been some level of resistance and counter representations to stereotypical images of blacks. Dates and Barlow (1993), for instance, discuss how many black image-makers strive to present images that challenge the common conceptions, and portray black culture in a more diverse light. They argue that cultural representation becomes a 'war of images' split between white and black image-makers and the audience they seek to cater for. This 'war of images' therefore refers to the struggle for control over representations of black culture between the two different camps.

When discussing images of black culture, therefore, it is important to remember that blacks do have some level of control of their image, even if the overall control of the media is predominantly white owned. Those such as Boyd (1997) and Bynoe (2002) highlight that rappers do control their own image to some extent. Bynoe for instance, notes the mainstream success of conscious rappers (those who are politically and socially aware) such as 'Common' and 'Lauryn Hill'. Common - a black male rapper - openly challenges many of the stereotypes of black males. He discusses through his lyrics issues rarely addressed by many 'commercial rappers'. His topics include sexual restraint, the deceit of the music industry and the direction of Hip Hop; he also strives to represent women more positively. Likewise those such as Lauryn Hill counter many of the derogatory stereotypes of black women and offer political and social criticisms through their lyrics. Their success in the mainstream indicates that there is a space and a market (though somewhat limited) for these counter representations to be received.

In summary then, when discussing the images of black culture, a number of issues are raised. Firstly, the commodification of black culture does not necessarily represent 'black experience' because the majority of representations have tended to present black culture in a narrow and simplified form that panders to images of the 'racial other'. Secondly, it is in the interest of those in control of black cultural images (who in most instances happen to be whites) to promote those images most easily received or in the most demand by the majority of the audience. This has the capacity to distort images or only give a partial picture of the reality of certain social groups. Finally, there has been some level of recognition of these stereotypes. This has engendered a level of minority resistance to these images by certain black image-makers and entertainers, who have sought to offer alternative representations of blackness and offer some food for thought for both blacks and whites.

What I want to do in the next chapter is explore some of the issues behind the perceptions of race and the influences of black culture within western society. We have established in this chapter the widespread demand for elements of black culture and the way that this demand, more often than not, leads to narrow or stereotypical representations of race. I now want to look a little deeper at the implications that this may have. It is therefore necessary to explore the ways in which the images that have been discussed here have the potential to influence both black and white perceptions of race. This involves firstly considering the influence that black culture has had on both Western culture and in constructing Western identities. In considering this influence, it is also necessary to consider the arguments put forward that the influence of black culture does not necessarily challenge racist thinking or the wider forces of racism that have structured Western society. Secondly, it is important to consider that the images received through the mass media have the potential to shape blacks self-definition, and that within a society where many must deal with institutional racism, discrimination, prejudicial attitudes and experiences, these images reinforce wider social circumstances and can lead to an acceptance of these images as a reality of 'black experience'. The following chapter seeks to address these issues.

Influences of Black Culture and Perceptions of Race

When considering the influence of black culture in Western society, it becomes once again necessary to reiterate that culture is not pure or fixed but is a result of a hybrid of influences. This is especially true in the case of Western culture, in which many influences including blacks and black culture have played a large part in constructing (Hall 1996, Young 1995). However, in terms of the *perceptions* of race, these contributions remain largely unacknowledged beyond the common stereotypes of 'black talent' in the realms of music, sport and entertainment (Cashmore 1997). In terms of actually being regarded as a part of Western culture, even though elements of black culture are a part of this, there remains a common conception of blacks as *others,* as different, as outside of Western culture (Gubar 1997). Many social factors - including the representations within the media encourage this perception, causing image to be accepted as fact.

In questioning the effects of racial images on the perception of race, it must be acknowledged that they operate within a wider social context in which racism, exclusion or ethnocentricity are constantly being reinforced. This is evident when we consider the arguments surrounding race and education (Milner 1983), racial difference in employment and economic status (Malveaux 2002), spatial and structural exclusion (Young 1999) and a lack of sufficient representation of blacks within positions of political power (Daniels 2002). These factors combined, result in the maintenance of what Piertese (1992) and Cashmore (1997) term a 'racial hierarchy'- that places whites at the top and reinforces (though not necessarily overtly) notions of white superiority.

When we take into consideration this wider social context, we can begin to understand how an appreciation of black culture can coexist in the mind of an individual, alongside racist or ignorant thinking, thus demonstrating that perceptions of race are not necessarily challenged by a celebration of commodified black culture.

This is demonstrated especially in the work of Les Back (1996, 2000) who shows how a hybrid of influences can shape our identity and that an appreciation, respect, or even an incorporation of elements of black culture can still operate within an imagined racial hierarchy.

One of the best examples of this can be found in Back's (2000) consideration of Skinhead style. Despite the strong racist sentiments that are regarded as characteristic of skinheads in later years, black music played a crucial part in the formation of Skinhead style. Skinhead style emerged in the late 1960s and was constructed as asserting a white working class identity that supposedly embodied masculinity and power. However, it was black music - particularly reggae and ska that helped to appropriate this identity. As Back explains, skinhead culture had something of a 'discordant hybridity' in that many skinheads were openly racist and displayed sentiments of racial hatred but that a form of music adopted from black reggae music that came to be known as 'skinhead reggae' and a dance called the 'skinhead moonstomp' all incorporated elements of black culture that reinforced this white identity (Back 2000: 4)

The example of the skinheads is one that highlights the complex nature of cultural influences and illustrates that black culture can be extremely popular and play a hand in the construction of many different identities, but at the same time perceptions of blacks can remain highly derogatory (Back 2000, hooks 1992, Young 1995). An example of this is demonstrated once again by Back in a story he recounts about a conversation that he had with a young skinhead who was infatuated with house music. Back explained that house music was crucially influenced by black DJs and pointed out that if this boy got his wish and all blacks were thrown out of the country then his beloved music would go with it: *'A moment of silent reflection ensued, and Daniel cocked his head to one side. He finally replied, "No, because we will still have the tapes won't we!" (2000:12).*

This encounter shows the way in which elements of black culture can be used and appreciated in a way which ignores racial dimensions - thus Back argues that overt racism and infatuation with black music can exist in an individuals mind without any sense of contradiction - it does not necessarily alter ones perception of racial inferiority or superiority.

Bell hooks (1992) expresses a similar view in her works. Arguing that the popularity of 'black culture' in society in no way challenges a culture of 'white supremacy', she explains that whites can appropriate commodified black culture *'without interrogating whiteness or showing concern for the displeasure of blacks' (1992:154).* Critiquing the representations of race through the mass media, hooks argues that it is not only whites who internalise definitions of blackness which are narrow and stereotypical, but that blacks themselves, in a culture that constantly promotes white supremacy, learn to accept white appropriated definitions of their being. This acceptance hinders the capacity to challenge, critique and contradict the dominant images of blackness that bombard us: *'Many black people are convinced that our lives are not complex and therefore not worthy of reflection'* (1992:2). An example of this, argues hooks, can be found when we consider the white construction of black masculinity. Over time black men have been consistently represented as highly sexualised (Gubar 1997), patriarchal (hooks 1992) violent, and materialistic (hooks 1994). Hooks

argues that many black men have internalised the mainstream image of black masculinity and have become so bound by these stereotypes that they perceive these characteristics as definitions of who black men should be. This is just one example of the way in which images of black culture can affect perceptions and influences of black culture.

So far it has been demonstrated that while black culture has been highly influential and widely appreciated, it does not necessarily provide a remedy for prejudiced or narrow perceptions of race. A white person can regard black culture with respect, incorporate elements of black cultural expression in their manner of speech or style and can even have black friends but yet still, during an argument with a black person, use a racist name to denounce them. A black person can internalise white defined ideas of their being and come to fulfil the very racial stereotypes that they might otherwise resist, thus reinforcing an ongoing pattern (Pierterse 1992). However, what also needs to be considered is that we are not cultural dopes who will all passively receive and appropriate particular images in a narrow or homogenous way. There may be those who resist white appropriated definitions of blackness and reject any superior/ inferior notions of race. As the following examples show us.

Alexander (1996) and Hall (1996) both argue that it is inadequate to look at black experience simply through the context of racism, as black experience is much wider and diverse than simply being a product of racism. Rather than passively accepting white appropriated definitions of blackness, Alexander (1996) demonstrates through her ethnographic research on black men, the ways in which the men she came across interpreted and moulded particular stereotypes of black masculinity in a complex way. In describing what she terms ‘the art of being black’ Alexander uses the term ‘double consciousness’ to describe the identities of the young black men in her study. Double consciousness is a term that was originally used by Du Bois (1964) but also by Mercer (1994) Dates and Barlow (1993) and Gilroy (1994) that encapsulates the awareness that blacks have of whites perceptions of them. The awareness of being outside of a culture that you are at the same time a part of. Alexander argues that the black men she studied were all aware of the stereotypes and expectations of black youth but that these stereotypes were not passively internalised. Instead Alexander explains that although these men were at times constrained and constricted by these stereotypes, they also had the power to use them for their own advantage, and to twist and redefine their meaning depending upon the circumstance. Examples of this include the reclamation and redefinition of the word ‘nigger’, which was used by the men she studied as a term of both abuse and affection depending upon the context (1996:115), and the use of the myth of black male sexuality, which many of the men adapted and used for personal gain. Alexander thus concluded that:

> ‘For too long black communities in Britain have been regarded as passive recipients of external constraints, or the desperate searchers after an identity based on myth and illusion. For blacks as well as whites, culture and identity are continually created and recreated; it alters over time and according to different circumstance’ (1996:118).

In Alexander's view we must not underestimate the agency of individuals to adapt, redefine or reject particular images. In this sense then, the popularity of black culture can be either a positive thing or a negative thing - depending on the interpretation and definition of the images received by a given individual whether white or black. Not all blacks and whites will view black experience in narrow terms and an interest in black culture may lead to opportunities for interactions between blacks and whites who might otherwise not have come together. As Back (1996) explains in his study of London's youth culture, the demand and popularity of black influenced music led to the emergence of prominent soul and hip hop scenes that brought a variety of cultures together. If common interests can bring people together and experience can supersede stereotypes and myths, then the popularity of black culture can provide an opportunity for blacks and whites to come together and learn first hand the diversity and complexity of any culture, not necessarily just black culture. The popularity of black culture therefore has the potential to create *opportunities* for a more enlightened understanding of racial issues (such as through creating spaces for multi racial interaction and identification) although it depends largely on individual agency whether or not this happens.

Through the consideration of the types of images present in commodified black culture, discussed in chapter one, and the consideration in this chapter of the various degrees of influence that black culture has on the construction of identities and the perceptions of race, we have established the complex and diverse impact of commodified black culture and its potential for influencing a number of different ways of thinking about race. I feel there is a need to apply these issues to real people to provide insight into this complex issue and to find out in people's own words and experiences the impact of black culture. I have decided to conduct interviews in order to consider the views of both blacks and whites regarding the way that they feel black culture is represented, and the effects of these representations. Through these interviews I hope to explore whether blacks feel a pressure to conform to any stereotypical images that they feel may be generated in popular black culture and if they do, whether they accept or reject these definitions of their being. I also want to explore the extent to which these images inform whites of 'racial differences' and question the degree (if any) that it informs their perceptions of blacks.

Methodology

When selecting the most appropriate methods for research, a number of matters need to be considered. Firstly, as Mason (2002) suggests, it is crucial to identify the kind of knowledge that you want to yield in order to determine the most beneficial method of study to do this. Secondly, a number of considerations need to be taken into account. These include issues such as practicality, time and resources and ethics. What also needs to be considered are the potential problems that can take place during the course of research and the influence of the researcher on the execution of the research and the interpretation of the findings (Connolly 1996, Pole and Lampard 2002). Taking all these points in to consideration, what I want to do in this section is to explain why the methods I used were deemed most appropriate for my study. I want to discuss the considerations and constraints that helped determine these decisions, the problems and issues that arose during the research and the ways I tried to minimise them.

Method:

When considering the type of knowledge I wanted to yield in my research, I identified one of my key objectives as being the desire to gain insight in to the complex issues that had been raised in the literature I had studied. A number of matters - such as the potential effects that images of black culture may have had on both black and white perception, as well as the way in which we understand and appropriate these images within the context of wider social experiences - had been raised. Issues of identity, perceptions and understandings had stemmed from this, which would have proved difficult to measure in an impersonal way. As the experiences and effects that I hoped to explore were not quantifiable, and my quest for a deeper understanding of the issues raised were a top priority for me, a qualitative approach was selected as the most desirable method. While aware of the criticisms that surround using a solely qualitative approach to research, especially that of qualitative data being too subjective (Bryman 2001), I felt using a solely qualitative method was justifiable in the case of my research. This was because the 'rich and contextual data' that can be yielded from qualitative methods (Pole and Lampard 2002) was essential in exploring the issues I felt had been raised. Issues such as time and practicality also influenced this decision.

In selecting a method of qualitative data most appropriate for the study, I opted for in depth interviews using an interview guide. In assessing the benefits of using interviews, it is argued by those such as Seidman (1998) that interviews essentially involve 'meaning making stories. During the interviewing process the researcher gains insight into the *'experiences of other people and the meaning that they make of that experience'* (1998: 1). Elsewhere those such as Palmer (1982) point out that interviews:

> ' … provide the opportunity for the researcher to probe deeply, to uncover new clues, to open up new dimensions of a problem and to secure vivid, accurate accounts from informants that are based on personal experience' (as cited in Burgess 1982:107).

Interviews therefore, were deemed the most appropriate method to use, as it would give respondents the opportunity to convey their experiences in their own words and allow me to address the issues raised in accordance with this.

The Interviews:

10 in depth interviews were conducted with 5 black and 5 white respondents with ages ranging from 20 - 33. Interviews lasted between 20 and 60 minutes and took on average 45 minutes. The location of the interview was specified at the interviewee's request, usually taking place in either their home or in the home of the mutual contact who had brought us together. In two of the cases where this was not convenient for the interviewee, they were interviewed in a different location, which I will not specify due to my promise of confidentiality. All interviewees were interviewed alone. Each respondent was questioned on the topics specified on the interview guide (see appendix B) in order to keep some level of focus on the issues that were addressed (Gerson and Horowitz 2002). The need for respondents to

elaborate on areas they personally felt important was also recognised and tangents and deviations from the topics as well as elaborations on certain areas were anticipated (Seidman 1998).

In considering my methods of research and considering the issues that had arisen through the literature, I felt that it would be beneficial to stratify respondents equally in terms of race. Although I had compromised generalisability by using qualitative methods alone, I felt that using an equal number of both black and white respondents would be beneficial. I felt that this might offer a wider perspective in attempting to explore some of the effects, responses and understandings of black culture. I also hoped that this would add a new dimension in my attempt to explore the 'subjective understandings' of the respondents (Seidman 1998) that would stem from their own life experiences. By balancing the number of blacks and whites interviewed, I felt that I would be able to adequately explore the different ways that black culture influences and is received by both black and white individuals. I hoped that this method would allow the individuals to directly address many of the issues that had been suggested in the literature.

Due to time purposes and my desire to stratify respondents equally in terms of race, an appropriate sampling frame proved problematic. The sample used was found through requesting personal contacts to nominate and approach individuals not known directly to me, and ask if they would be willing to participate. While aware of the fact that this resulted in a biased sample, I felt that this was the easiest way to ensure both an equal number of black and white respondents within the limited time frame, and also to maximise the co-operation of the interviewees. The fact that the personal contacts who approached them would be known to both of us may make them more amenable to the interview and would possibly minimise the suspicions that may arise on the part of the interviewee. I hoped that this method would encourage a sense of rapport and trust that proves so crucial in qualitative interviewing (Pole and Lampard 2002).

Ethics:

It is widely acknowledged that sociological researchers have an ethical obligation to protect those who participate in their research and be careful not to tarnish the reputation of sociology, thus hindering the chances for other researchers to research similar areas (Bryman 2001). It was crucial therefore, that I minimised any anxiety that the research might cause and made sure that I informed the respondents to the best degree possible of my intentions for the research and their participation in it (Arksey and Knight 1999). A number of steps were taken to ensure that the interviewing process went as smoothly as possible.

As Pole and Lampard (2002) acknowledge, the location of an interview can have implications on the level of comfort during an interview. I felt that by allowing the interviewees to choose the time and location of the interview, they could choose the setting that was most convenient for them and that this would result in information flowing more freely. A pre interview checklist was taken to each interview (see appendix A) in order to make sure that each interviewee was as informed as possible of what they were involved in, the approximate time that it would take and their right to withdraw at any point during the interview. It also made sure that I had

permission to tape record the interview, as permission should never be assumed (Arksey and Knight 1999). During the interviews I tried appear as impartial and non-judgemental as possible to encourage interviewees to openly and comfortably express their opinions, experiences and feelings with me, without fear of judgement (Gerson and Horowitz 2002).

Researcher Presence:

Despite my attempts to minimise any anxiety or discomfort caused during the interviews, I had to acknowledge the fact that my presence would inevitably affect the entire process (Seidman 1998). Not only because the data generated would be subject to my own interpretations and analysis (Pole and Lampard 2002), but also because my gender, ethnicity and overall appearance would affect the way in which I, as the researcher, would be perceived and related to by the interviewees (Seidman 1998).

It was therefore important to consider, when conducting my interviews, potential power dynamics (Connolly 1996, Reynolds 2002) in terms of my ethnicity and gender. As a female of mixed heritage who tends to be perceived as black, I needed to consider the way in which my sample of both black and white, and male and female interviewees would relate to me. In terms of the females in my sample, there were potential benefits if we consider the arguments put forward by those such as Finch (1992). According to Finch, when females interview one another there tends to be an instant rapport, due to shared status, which is conducive to an 'easy flow of information' (Finch as cited in Hammersley 1992:187). Similarly, in terms of ethnic background, Seidman (1998) argues that interviewing respondents from ethnic minorities is less problematic for a researcher from a similar background, because this shared status also minimises hostility and caution on the part of the interviewee.

During my interviews, I noted that my ethnicity tended to be much more of an issue than my gender, in terms of the way in which I was related to. In terms of the white interviewees, both male and female, I felt, in a number of instances during the interviews, that my ethnicity proved to be quite an issue. The fact that white interviewees were being asked to comment on their thoughts, feelings and experiences of black culture to a 'black' researcher provoked visible apprehension in at least three out of the five interviews with white interviewees. This was apparent in instances prior, during and after the interviewing process. A common question before the interview was 'why do you want to interview me?' Three of the interviewees suggested that they did not feel 'qualified' to comment on black culture. During the interviews there were two instances where the interviewee became defensive in response to my questions, as if I were implying that they were racist. One of the interviewees kept diverting away from the issue of race altogether and stated afterwards: 'I didn't want you to think I'm racist', while another revealed after the interview that her repeated coughing during parts of the interview was a nervous reaction.

In response to these anxieties, I attempted to assure all interviewees that their opinions and perspectives would be valued and appreciated. I explained that I wanted to understand the different responses and interpretations of black culture, rather than just consider black responses and that being 'qualified' to comment was

not an issue. I also stressed the confidentiality with which I would treat any comments, and encouraged each respondent to talk openly without fear of me judging them. Despite these assurances, there were instances where I felt that interviewees were answering rather cautiously. This is understandably so - especially when considering arguments by Arksey and Knight (1999) that persuading people to express their honest opinions and thoughts especially on a sensitive topic such as race can be problematic because people tend to be concerned with 'impression management' (1999:109). Therefore in expressing thoughts on race to a 'black' researcher it is reasonable to assume that respondents may want to present themselves to seem as anti-racist as possible.

Being aware of the fact that anxiety on the part of the interviewee is an ethical concern, I took heed of the advice of Arksey and Knight (1999) who advise interviewers never to leave interviewees in any state of distress. After the interviews I talked a little more to each respondent, asking if they had any questions, explaining a little more about the research and explaining why their input was so valuable. I also shared some of the difficulties I was having with the research and the way that I had noticed my ethnicity tended to be an issue during the interviews. By being honest with the interviewees, sharing my experience of the research with them, and explaining why their input was so valuable (Arksey and Knight 1999), they appeared more at ease with the situation and appeared to have a clearer understanding of the part that they had played in my research.

In hindsight then, the argument that shared status is conducive to an easy flow of information, was more the case during my interviews with the black interviewees (both male and female). During these interviews, it appeared that the black interviewees were much more at ease talking to me in the interviews and seemed to feel less of a need to watch what they were saying. This was probably due to the fact that the research topic was about black culture, and they were more comfortable because they felt more 'qualified' to answer my questions. After one interview where I was thanking the respondent for their time and participation she said: "no thank *you* for asking me such interesting questions", while another interviewee told me I was welcome to contact him again if I needed anything else for the research.

It has been suggested by those such as Brar (1992) and Seidman (1998) that it is problematic for researchers attempting to build an effective interviewing relationship between themselves and the researched to do so with those of a different racial or ethnic background. Brar (1992) goes as far to suggest that we should avoid doing this altogether because of the power dynamics involved. On both a personal level and with regard to the research conducted, I feel that although some problems arose due to the issue of race it was still beneficial for me to look at both blacks and whites. As Pole and Lampard (2002) suggest, knowledge does not exist in a vacuum, and my presence and the way I interpreted each interview would have affected *all* of the interviews regardless of race or gender. If I had only interviewed blacks, my own opinions, assumptions and subjectivity may not have been questioned or kept in check in the same way that my experience interviewing both races made me do. As Seidman points out:

> 'Although the shared assumptions that come from common backgrounds may make it easier to build rapport, interviewing requires interviewers to have

> enough distance to enable them to ask real questions and to explore, not to share assumptions' (1998: 84)

Thus my decision to racially stratify the interviewees and my experience of interviewing, made me more aware of my role as an interviewer and helped maintain the level of distance that was crucial in minimising the risk of the issues raised becoming too wrapped up in my own personal assumptions and experiences.

Results/Discussion.

The main aim of this research has been to explore the impact that the popularity of black culture has on the way that we think about race. It has involved questioning the extent to which this popularity can be viewed as positive through the consideration of the *way* that black culture is represented within mainstream culture, and what these representations signify. It has involved questioning the types of images of blacks and black culture that are most prominent and has required consideration of the impact that this can have on influencing individual's experiences and perceptions of race. The interviews that were conducted aimed to draw on the experiences and understandings of individuals concerning these issues. During this chapter I want to discuss the concepts that arose from these interviews and how they relate to the impact of 'black culture'. As this is a complex issue I have broken this chapter into sections to deal with the concepts that arose.

Representations

In terms of questioning the way that 'black culture' is represented, evidence from the interviews suggested that one of the main concerns with these representations or portrayals lay in a perceived lack of diversity of black experience. In this sense, arguments put forward by those such as Cashmore (1997) and Merelman (1995) regarding the selective nature of the mass media and its capacity to appropriate images in a selective way, conforming to and maintaining particular ways of thinking about race, proved particularly salient. There was a widespread dissatisfaction with the representations of blacks through the mass media, and it was widely felt that a lot more could be done to integrate cultural diversity and challenge conceptions of black culture that may be narrow and stereotypical. What also emerged through the interviews however, was the different ways in which this lack of diversity within black representations manifested. For instance, within TV programmes such as soaps, one of the main sources of dissatisfaction with the images of blacks lay in the issue of 'tokenism'. It was widely felt that within TV, the presence of blacks was portrayed on a token basis without any understanding of the complexity and diversity that those such as hooks (1992) argue is characteristic of black culture:

> 'I don't know if they are represented in television very well. If you look at soaps and stuff like that, they are kind of typecast, you know a black family - they're just kind of thrown in there. They're not very realistic …the writers probably none of them are black and they just probably write what they think people want to hear' (Interviewee I, black female).

In this sense then, the main problem of the racial images on TV is that they failed to grasp an understanding of the meanings and variety of black experience by just 'throwing them in there'. This resulted in a rejection of these images for being totally unrepresentative of black people and culture - *'When you see black people on TV it's not the real black people. Everyone knows that innit?'* (Interviewee B - black male) - the lack of identification with these images combined with the perceived lack of effort that those in control of the images had undertaken in their attempts to portray black culture, counteracted any positive aspects that the increased visibility of blacks and black culture within television could have had. So, while it was widely acknowledged that the presence of blacks was a lot more prominent within TV than about twenty years before, it was not necessarily deemed as a positive thing due to the unconvincing way in which blacks were portrayed.

In terms of the way that these 'unconvincing representations' of blacks were received, it became apparent that the lack of legitimate success that black characters within the majority of TV shows were portrayed as having, led to resistance to these images. Many looked to specifically black (usually American) programmes to provide some sort of identification: *'I get more of that from America, than like programmes and stuff - I can identify more with the 'Fresh Prince of Bel Air' than with any soap' (*Interviewee G - black female). This confirmed the argument put forward by Dates and Barlow (1993) that when a collective dissatisfaction with generalised images is recognised, alternative representations seeking to cater to the interests of the marginalized group are offered. These counter-representations appeared to be received more favourably with a black audience, with many citing predominately black TV shows, in which the main black characters were professionals with strong family values. The programmes cited tended to be the ones created by blacks, which the black interviewees argued they found more identifiable. As Dates and Barlow argue, there tends to be a 'split' of the black image into two camps; the mainstream representation, as described in the previous paragraph, and the counter-representation, as described here. As a consequence of this 'war of images' (discussed by Dates and Barlow in chapter one), it appeared that a schism had been created, which as interviewee E indicated, encouraged possible partition:

> *' … there is often the case of there being a token black person in soaps or everybody in the soap is black, so it's really quite solidified on one side or the other…but there's never much of a compromise or a balance of two orientations of culture' (Interviewee E - white male).*

This meant that this 'war of images' possibly reinforced an idea of separation, which was argued to promote an understanding of 'them and us' rather than promoting an idea of true integration. This issue of integration, which I shall discuss later in this chapter, proved a particularly important issue, both at the level of cultural representations and at the level of understanding.

While the main concern with the majority of programmes on TV proved to be tokenism, which was argued to fail at providing *any* sort of understanding of black culture, the representations of blacks and black culture within newspapers, music videos and rap lyrics provided a different concern that lay in the *misunderstanding* of what black culture was about. It was within these contexts that many of the most

prominent racial stereotypes came into play. The example of rap music proved particularly important in terms of the way that many commercially successful rap songs portrayed black culture, but the main issue tended to be the *reaction* to this music by the media. The media backlash against rap music (and the attempts to link it to black crime) was cited during *all* the interviews as a factor instigating hostility towards and generalisations of black culture. Interviewee C for example, criticised the selective nature of the media and its condemnation of rap, arguing that it failed to adequately examine the underlying issues that encouraged certain rap songs 'controversial' lyrics:

> 'Anything to blame something on someone…someone's spitting about the life they live you know what I'm saying? It's a true life but the lyrics that they focus on is very negative… they're just checking out certain things like 'I shot man, I kill man' they're not really looking on WHY? WHY? WHY? And WHY?' (Interviewee C - black male).

In this sense, it appeared that media focus on particular rap artists as responsible for instigating crime, further encouraged the image of the stereotype outlined by Bynoe (2002) and hooks (1992) of the black man as dangerous and threatening, treating these lyrics as though they existed in a vacuum, and ignoring the wider social circumstances and power structures out of which these lyrics were a response. As the controversy over rap lyrics sparked audience interest that propelled the most excessive rap songs into the limelight, these stereotypes were further confirmed as the controversy generated made excess more and more marketable. The 'popularity' of this aspect of black culture then, appeared to lie in its *notoriety* rather than a genuine, informed appreciation of it. This notoriety of rap music was not necessarily a positive thing as it was thought to encourage hostility and generalisations of what black culture was about, without examining these images adequately.

Effects of representations and stereotypes:

As Bynoe (2002) had noted, the commercial success and excessive attention of rap music with both a black and white audience had led to a tendency for rap to be commonly accepted as black culture as a whole, rather than just one aspect of it. The effects of rap music were both singled out and amplified by the media, which led to what many of the interviewees felt was an over-association of the negative aspects of rap with black people in general:

> 'It's too generalised it's too subjective, do you know what I mean? They see that and the first thing that comes they're "oh this is the way they are, this is how all of them behave, they're all loud, they all smoke weed, they are drug barons or pushers" and those negative vibes'. (Interviewee A - black female).

While media reactions towards rap lyrics were perceived to be more of a problem than the lyrics themselves, what also emerged through the interviews was the issue of the images of black culture portrayed in rap and R&B videos. These visual images were widely perceived as reinforcing or portraying negative or stereotypical images of blacks. The stereotypes outlined by Bynoe (2002), Gubar (1997) and hooks (1992, 1994) regarding the common images of blacks as highly sexualised,

misogynistic and materialistic, appeared to be most blatant in the images conjured up in the rap videos that tended to get the most play on, for example, MTV:

> '…it is all the same and it does seem like in the last two years all the videos have been wads of cash and women not wearing a lot in swimming pools and stuff' (Interviewee D - white female).

In terms of the effects of these visual images, an issue that arose from the interviews indicated that while those questioned showed awareness of these images as unrepresentative and, in many cases, unrealistic or over embellished, a common concern was regarding the younger and more impressionable audience who may not have the same capacity to question what they see:

> ' You know like all the fakeness, how mans get shot and all this and they're real gangsters it's not true and some kids, young people are looking on that and thinking like 'yeah that's me, that's the way…and they're not looking at the real world, they're not looking at the realness of life' (Interviewee C - black male).

In this case hooks' (1992) fears of the effects of stereotypes on blacks themselves were possibly most applicable to a younger audience who may not question what they see in the same way as adults might. A strong theme that emerged through the interviews in terms of the interviewees themselves however, was the strong tendency to question the issues *behind* the images being projected and the level of caution with which these images were received. This illustrated that the reflexive capacity of the audience should not be undermined:

> 'Through the TV, like you gotta ask a whole lot of questions, do you know what I mean? What are you looking at? How much are you meant to know about it? And how much do you know about it?' (Interviewee E - white male).

In questioning images and representations of black culture within the mass media then, it became apparent that the popularity or prominence of 'black culture' within the mainstream was something of a double-edged sword. This was due to the lack of diversity within representations and the negativity that often surrounded aspects of black culture - the media attention towards rap music was an example of this. However, what also came through in the interviews was the way in which the increased visibility of 'black culture' (even if it was in a narrow form) gave rise to a stronger tendency to challenge or question what was being projected, thus emphasising the importance of human agency in the way in which images were received.

The popularity of black culture:

A key theme that emerged through the interviews regarding the question of the popularity of black culture was the sentiment that 'excess sells'. Arguments by Boyd (1997), Cashmore (1997) and hooks (1992, 1994) who argued that the profitability of black cultural images lay in their 'excessiveness' were particularly applicable to this issue. Through the interviews however, it was also argued that the profitability of 'excess' did not just stop at black cultural representations but was profitable

generally. Violence in movies, whether white or black, alongside songs with obscene language or highly sexual images, were all attributed as being extremely appealing and marketable to a general audience, as interviewee B explained:

> '…that's what people wanna see, that's what people wanna hear, for some strange reason people like violence…I reckon every human being has got a thing about violence, if you watch a film you wanna see someone get shot or get hurt…no matter if he's a racist person or not, so you cant really pass the blame on music or people cos that's just human, that's just the way we live' (Interviewee B - black male).

It tended to be viewed that excess and negativity were profitable generally: *'What's the most selling thing in this world? …Weapons and drugs right? That'll show you negativity is a strong thing… Negativity sells' (*Interviewee C - black male).

It was also acknowledged however, that this was possibly more detrimental to the image of black culture because of the lack of alternative representations offered, as well as the extent to which they did conform to the most common racial stereotypes. A prime example used by the majority of the interviewees was the huge success of black male rapper '50 Cent' who fulfilled the definition outlined by Bynoe (2002) of the 'commercial rapper'. This was because his music videos, lyrics and album cover all gave rise to a sexual, violent and materialistic image, which as hooks had previously argued was bound to get 'enormous play' (1994). This success was not considered as particularly positive as it was associated as being part of a 'forbidden' attraction to an excessive image:

> 'I think it's the whole difference thing isn't it? Like he's something else and he's, yeah it's that whole dangerous black man thing, it's like that whole 'other' thing isn't it? It's the outside of what you would normally have, what you're told not to have, cause black music is seen as a rebellion in a way' (Interviewee I, black female, on the subject of '50 Cent').

Here it appeared that in some cases the profitability of black culture lay very much in its 'difference' or contradictions to the values of 'mainstream culture', as Cashmore (1997) and hooks (1992, 1994) had highlighted. This popularity and demand for a bit of the 'other' was viewed as more detrimental to images and perceptions of black culture than positive. What also emerged through the interviews though, was the fact that not all elements of black culture will be related to on an entirely racial basis or on an entirely negative basis. Once again the importance of human agency in the reception of these images was emphasised, as interviewee E indicated in explaining the ways that he felt Hip Hop style influenced him:

> INT: what parts do you identify with?
>
> E: Just the break dancing and the Graffiti and the looking for words, just like having somebody with a similar perspective …more style than like any of the race orientation at all, it's all to do with style and nothing more' (white male).

Here it was demonstrated just as Back (2000) had argued, that white individuals could appropriate black culture in a way that ignored racial dimensions. Contrary to

Back's example however, in this instance it was not necessarily a negative thing as it did not exist alongside derogatory perceptions of blacks, but rather existed alongside a recognition that interaction was the most important factor in racial integration and in understanding elements of black culture:

> 'I feel like if you really wanna think about it properly, then to touch races with people is more important than anything that the media throws forward, cos I don't really experience anything that I hear about black people, either on record or on TV, on a day to day basis' (Interviewee E - white male).

If we are questioning the most profitable and prominent images of black culture then, it becomes apparent the popularity of black culture in itself does not represent a positive advancement in the way that we think about race if the attraction of these images lies in them being a 'rebellion' of the norm or the extent to which they fit in with a general attraction to negativity. Excessive images tend to amplify stereotypes rather than challenge them or enlighten people about the realities of black culture. However while 'excess' may be the most profitable or prominent image of black culture, it is not the *only* image out there and attraction to elements of black culture may not always be a rebellion, may not always be a result of an attraction to negativity, and are subject to interpretation:

> 'It comes across as a warm culture…it comes across as an honest and interesting way of life I think' (Interviewee J - white male, on the subject of black music).

Throughout the interviews there *was* a strong recognition of positive images or realistic images that challenged these stereotypes even if they didn't attract the most limelight and this did represent advancement.

> 'For one it's publicity, and I mean black people are coming out more now so it's like 'hey here we are' 'we're in your face' do you see what I mean? There could be more expanding but people are becoming educated more of the ways of life for different cultures' (Interviewee A - black female).

Therefore, the interviews indicated that people receive images and are influenced by black culture in a number of different ways.

Integration:

Integration was highlighted during the interviews as being a crucial factor for advancement. This was argued to be important both at the level of cultural representations and at the level of understanding and challenging images received. At the level of representations within mainstream culture, it was observed that a realistic integration of black and white images would possibly be more beneficial than a split camp of black and white extremes:

> 'It promotes partition, you're developing cultures to stay orientated around one thing, but whereas I know that I live in a very diverse and multicultural society to such a point that things like that can no longer happen because it

> does just promote the partition that, you know, "that's them and that's us'"…people have got to be integrated' (Interviewee E, white male).

At the level of understanding, integration was highlighted as a key factor in challenging and disregarding images of black culture as being representative of the whole of black culture. The interviews indicated that due a higher level of racial integration on a daily basis, than say previous generations, today's generation were particularly sensitised to the many of the issues of racism and tended to be more questioning of images they saw: - *'You just take everything with a pinch of salt really'* (Interviewee J - white male*).* Just as Back (1996) had suggested, the recognition of black culture could lead to opportunities for interactions which had the capacity to educate and integrate people, giving everybody the chance to learn about each other:

> 'I've made several black friends and several other raced friends and I think that seeing how - you know their brothers and sisters and their mums - seeing what they do, I think that's shown me that it is not all that you see on telly at all, whatever programme or whatever music it is' (Interviewee D - white female).

Therefore it did appear that interaction and integration helped to counter racial stereotypes and encourage those receiving these images to take them 'with a pinch of salt'. Integration was argued to be the key factor in superseding racial stereotypes and myths, at least on a basic level, although as will now be discussed, this was not the case when considered within a wider context.

Perceptions of Race Within a Wider Context:

In questioning the effects of particular images and representations of black culture on blacks themselves, it emerged that these images could have a negative effect. This is because although overt racism had appeared to have gone 'underground,' as interviewee G put it, it was still widely felt that that many wider social factors affected racial advancement. As highlighted by those such as Daniels (2002), Malveaux (2002), Milner (1983), Pierterse (1992) and Young (1999) experiences of ethnocentricity, discrimination and exclusion that many black individuals faced on a day to day basis, helped further exclude them from feeling 'integrated' into 'White Britain'. Particular representations of blacks and black culture then, that were narrow or stereotypical, or that were perceived as reflecting or reinforcing stereotypical images of blacks and black culture added insult to injury. This was especially the case when every day encounters appeared to reflect an application of these images to the individuals:

> 'I walk through town, white people grab their purses, or Indian people grab their purses, or I walk past a car and they lock the door cos I got my hood up or a hat or a du rag on and they automatically watch me in society and say "that's 'O'Dog", d'ya get me? "So lock our doors". Or I go to a white girls house and the mum looks at me like I'm gonna rob the place! (Interviewee B - black male).

So, when there appeared to be consistencies between representations of black culture and the stereotypes and barriers that individuals felt were applied to them personally, then these images became cause for concern. This could encourage and reinforce a feeling of being *outside* of Western culture, and the sense of 'double consciousness' (Alexander 1996) - being outside of a culture that you are at the same time a part of, and the awareness of the way that society perceives you, came into play here. Therefore, while it was proved during the interviews that images of black culture will not automatically be perceived in a narrow or homogenous way, it was also indicated these images *can* have detrimental effect when they reflect and relate to wider social experiences.

An example of these issues was highlighted by interviewee C, who expressed his frustration with what he perceived as an over -representation within the media of black males as sex symbols. This resulted, he had argued, in black men 'not being taken seriously'. Citing an advert for a black TV programme that had advertised the black male characters naked, it appeared that this focus was felt to reinforce a narrow definition of black masculinity which as hooks (1992) had argued was white appropriated and stereotypical. In terms of what these images represented for the individual, C related it to his own experience of this stereotype:

> C: 'I was the only black man in that school and everything was on that kind of joke…sex on legs and all that talk…
>
> INT: How does it make you feel when people think that of you?
>
> C: Sometimes you guy it off innit, you don't wanna say 'nah alright' but sometimes it do burn you later on - 'I should have confronted that' you know? And it does affect you so - it's again you gotta know how to deal with it, you gotta deal with it that's it, but it does hurt me when people look at me like that.'

While sometimes these stereotypes could be 'guyed off' as interviewee C put it, and used as an advantage as Alexander (1996) had indicated, representations of black culture that reinforced these common racial stereotypes could further encourage this notion of racial difference and this sense of 'double consciousness'. This did not appear to automatically result in an acceptance or wholehearted internalisation of these stereotypes, at least not in the case of my interviewees, who showed the capacity to disregard these images - *'I don't look on that for my reality' (Interviewee C, black male).* It did however, result in an acknowledgement that we were still a long way from significant racial advancement, and that the popularity of black culture did not counter this:

> 'You got your sports but you're not getting black man as top executive of that team, you got your music but you're not getting black man as a top executive of that record company, cos people set these grounds and that's your limit, you can tell where the lockdown is, how far you can go' (C - black male)

It appeared therefore, that more diverse representations of blacks would represent a positive advancement in the way that we think about race but that in order for this

advancement to be significant, wider social changes needed to take place including equal opportunities in practice rather than just in theory:

> 'Better education in schools about things, having equal amounts of black, Indian, white teachers, people in authority I think there needs to be in government and especially in Downing Street there needs to be a lot more races cause at the moment it doesn't represent the whole of Britain.' (Interviewee D - white female)

In summary then, the interviews shed light on many of the issues raised within the literature, giving insight into the types of images of black culture within mainstream culture and the various reactions to and effects of these images. At a basic level, the role of human agency proved crucial in understanding the way in which images were received although the most detrimental effects of racial stereotyping lay in wider society and the patterns of inequality which were not challenged by this 'popularity' of black culture. Just as Cashmore (1997) had argued, we should be cautious of welcoming the successes of 'commodified black culture' as a source of power or advancement for blacks, as the wider issues of inequality were still rife. While those within the limelight may do well for themselves, and while there may be a widespread demand for commodified black culture, in terms of the reality of experiences on an everyday basis, commodified black culture alone does not help to open doors of opportunity or adequately contribute to understandings of what black culture is about.

Conclusion.

In conclusion then, this research project has found that the popularity of black culture within mainstream culture does not particularly signify a positive advancement in the way that we think about race. Through examining the attitudes of those interviewed, it becomes apparent that the most prominent images generated within mainstream culture, lack the diversity and complexity needed to adequately portray a true representation of black culture. Instead, these images tend to reinforce rather than challenge existing racial stereotypes that conjure up images of the racial 'other'. Arguments raised within the literature, suggesting that the most prominent images of blacks and black culture tended to be narrow and stereotypical, were proved, during the interviews, to be very real causes for concern in the way that race is regarded and understood.

What this research has also established is that that the reflexive capacity of the audience, whether black or white, should not be undermined and that wider social factors also need to be taken into account. Factors such as the increasing integration of ethnic groups and a wider societal intolerance of overt racism have both had repercussions on the way that we understand race. These two factors have possibly contributed to an increased level of caution in accepting representations of black culture at face value. In receiving these images it is likely that they will be resisted or appropriated by the audience. In terms of a white audience, it may be that due to their own experiences with black people or black culture, that the images seen may be rejected, appropriated or disregarded as unrealistic and unrepresentative. In terms of a black audience, images may be rejected on the

grounds that they embody the very stereotypes that the individual experiences daily, and may be treated with caution because it is seen as contributing to the problem. While the popularity of black culture does indicate a high demand for these images, we must remember that these images can be broken down and appropriated in an individuals mind - they will not necessarily be accepted as a whole, or be accepted as reality despite their popularity.

To summarise then, I feel that the research conducted has backed up many of the arguments put forward in the literature. I feel that I proved the argument that the popularity of black culture within mainstream society does not represent a positive advancement in the way that we think about race. I feel that the interviews have shown that until the most prominent images of black culture are those images that reflect black culture as a wide ranging, rich array of influences and experiences, then we *do* need to be cautious of celebrating its popularity and success. The interviews conducted have shown the dissatisfaction with the most prominent images of black culture but have also illustrated the capacity for resistance to these images.

In hindsight, I feel that in many ways this research project fulfilled its aim of gaining insight into the implications of popular black culture by applying them to real people. In terms of future studies, I feel that it may be beneficial to apply the issues raised within my research to a wider age range as perceptions and experiences would be likely to vary among different generations. Another issue that would be useful to explore, might also be the differences of racial stereotypes applied to men and women and the different effects that these have on each. In reflecting on the interviews it does seem that this was an issue with the men and women interviewed, so it may be beneficial to explore this area when questioning the impact of black popular culture.

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Appendix A: Pre Interview Checklist

A copy of this checklist was taken to each interview to help ensure that I informed each participant as fully and as equally as possible of the part that they would be playing in my research.

Interviewee Rights

- Assure the respondent that their anonymity will be protected; the identity of the respondent will be kept confidential.
- Quotations from the interview will be used in the final report but will be used anonymously.
- Assure the respondent of their right to refuse to answer specific questions or request for the interview to be terminated at any point.
- Do I have permission to tape record the interview?

General Information:

- Explain general nature of the study
- General time: Approximately 45 minutes
- Does the respondent have any questions prior to the interview?

Appendix B: Interview Guide

1. What do you understand the term 'black culture' to mean?
2. How do you feel that black culture is represented within television?
3. How do you feel that black culture is represented within music? (*Include in this question the images generated through music videos and lyrics)*
4. Do the images that you've described in any way reflect your own definition of what you understand black culture to be?
4. Do you identify with the images that you've described?
5. Do you feel that these images affect the way in which you are perceived and/or perceive others?
6. From your own experiences, to what extent do you feel that the representations of black culture that you have described are accurate?
7. Do you feel that the mass media (music, television, magazines etc) heighten your awareness of racial issues, such as racism, discrimination or the experiences of black culture?
8. What kind of representations would you like to see?
9. What steps do you think need to be taken to help eradicate racism/discrimination:
    i. Within the mass media?
    ii. Within wider society?

Appendix C: The Interviewees

Interviewee A: Black female, 33
Interviewee B: Black male, 23
Interviewee C: Black male, 30
Interviewee D: White female, 20
Interviewee E: White male, 25
Interviewee F: White female, 22
Interviewee G: Black female, 22
Interviewee H: White male, 21
Interviewee I: White male, 22
Interviewee J: Black female, 21