THE PAINS OF RACISM AND ECONOMIC ADVERSITY IN YOUNG LONDONERS' LIVES: SKETCHING THE CONTOURS

Abstract

This paper sketches an analytical framework to conceptualise the way racial power and socio-economic precarity impacts the everyday lives of young minority ethnic Londoners. Using life stories and photo-elicitation, it elucidates the pains of racialisation, racism, and economic marginalisation using and extending the metrics (*depth, breadth, looseness and tightness*) used in Crewe's (2011) conceptualisation of the contemporary pains of imprisonment. While there is no intention to imply a straightforward parallel between systems of penal power and racial power, the commonalities in the feelings evoked are stark in their affect and effect. This framework offers a means to register the different forms, gradations and intensities of racializing processes which are not easily captured by the singular concept of racism.

Contact details of the corresponding author:

Professor Coretta Phillips
London School of Economics and Political Science
Department of Social Policy
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
020 7955 7974

Word Count: 9459

Introduction

The conceptual imprecision of the term 'racism' and variants such as 'institutional racism' have long been acknowledged by scholars (Mason 1982; Miles 1989). In a recent paper, Song (2014) too has problematized the ambiguous nature of the term 'racism' in both academic and popular discourse and the risk of assuming equivalence between disparate interactions involving different dyads of racialized actors, including those racialized as white. Formulations of racism have typically been understood as a dialectical relationship between racial ideologies and discourses - based on assumptions of immutable inferiority and superiority - and access to power, control, rights, resources, and opportunities that are unevenly distributed in ways which materially and symbolically subordinate minority ethnic groups (Omi and Winant 1994; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Feagin 2006). Such macro-level accounts, however, can lack a means to examine how the emotional register for racialized actors is constituted and reproduced including in the everyday (Essed 1991). Rattansi (2005) argues that there is an additional risk of reductionism when racism implies a singular presence or absence ('racist' or 'non-racist') rather than being able to accommodate the contingent nature of how race is operationalised in late modern times, particularly in its intersection with class, gender and nation. For Rattansi (2005) then, the concept of racialisation offers a multidimensional conceptualisation which can incorporate myriad forms and degrees of racism and discrimination, prioritising for investigation the complexities and ambiguities which the more blunt notion of racism can easily foreclose (Murji and Solomos 2005; Gonzalez-Sobrino and Goss 2019; cf. Goldberg 2005).

Phillips' (2011) racialisation framework offers a model to explicate the multi-layered dynamics which cumulatively produce adverse economic and socio-political outcomes for minority ethnic groups, through micro-level interactions, meso-level institutional processes, and macro-level structural forces, also importantly incorporating the distinct but overlapping nature of class stratification. Missing from this conceptualisation too, however, is a consideration of the ontological elements of racialized experience and the sense in which both the brute and more subtle exercise of racial domination is felt, enacted and embodied by those on its receiving end (Essed 1991; Swanton 2010; Yancy 2017). Or as Knowles (2003: 27) puts it, such accounts risk producing 'empty and mechanistic assertions about the social and political underpinning of race, which are not substantiated with *flesh*'.

There is, of course, Fanon's psychoanalytical work. His (1967/2008: 85) visceral description of black men's inferiority being sealed into their livery prepared by white men, creating an internal condition of alienation and being 'unmercifully imprisoned' by racism is compelling. Fanon talks of the affective burden of white interaction, of being encircled by a child's fear and terror in the "Look, A Negro!" encounter, of being surrounded ever more tightly by a white child's perception of him as dangerous, wicked, and ugly. In this Fanon feels an existential discombobulation engendered by objectification (Fanon 1967/2008). Yancy (2008) too has underscored the profound suffering caused by the white gaze's 'reading the surface' of black bodies as physically and sexually dangerous. An explicit focus on emotion and affect is also increasingly being seen as a key part of the sociological puzzle of understanding how both historical and contemporary systems of racial domination are maintained (Essed 1991; Wilkins and Pace 2014; Young Kim 2016).

There is also a voluminous literature examining the deleterious effects of perceptions of racism and discrimination on physical and mental health (Astell-Burt *et al.* 2012; Sullivan 2015). Threats to, and assaults on, a person's racial, ethnic or cultural integrity, can produce psychological symptoms of depression, anxiety, distress and even trauma, as well as having a detrimental effect on physical health (Paradies *et al.* 2015). Typically measured using standardised scales may not, however, be sensitive enough to record the multitude of subjective reactions to racial microaggressions, violent racism, and everything in between.

A mechanism for articulating the contemporary intricacies of racialisation and racism is offered in this paper. It avoids the binaristic view of whiteness as the sole determinant of life chances which risks divorcing race entirely from the stratifying conditions of class, gender, and nation in which they are enmeshed (Hall 1980; Anthias *et al.* 1992; Virdee 2014; Shilliam 2018). It additionally can interrogate the degrees and magnitude of institutional and interactional processes which racialize and to consider responses to the racial harms of everyday life. Taking as its starting point that an 'understanding of racial oppression cannot be an armchair exercise' (Golash-Boza 2016: 139), this framework is situated within the analysis of empirical data. The paper proposes an enlargement of our conceptual vocabulary to capture the dynamic conditions of race in intersection with other forms of inequality, while also incorporating the emotional currents which circulate in the everyday. It is in the integration of history, structure and emotion, using empirically grounded insights as well as theoretical analyses of race as a conditioning logic, that the greatest promise for challenging racial conditions that harm, disparage and degrade, can be found (Alexander 2000; Bonilla-Silva 2019).

From the 'Pains of Imprisonment' to the Pains of Racialisation and Racism
The analytical frame applied in this paper is one formulated by Crewe (2011, 2015), building on Sykes' (1958) notion of the 'pains of imprisonment'. These refer to the material and symbolic deprivations of liberty, goods and services, autonomy, security and heterosexual relationships, which bear on the individual and which are inherent to imprisonment. I do not wish to argue in any simplistic way that the experience of being incarcerated is the same as being imprisoned by one's race, despite this being hinted at when Fanon (1967/2008) describes being 'unmercifully imprisoned' by white racism. Self-evidently, exposure to racism may be a relatively common reality for some racialized groups while only a small proportion of the population are likely to be detained in penal institutions. This is even true in the US,[1] where for example, Wacqaunt (1999, 20009 argues that the hyperghetto encasing poor African Americans resembles the prison in its functional mechanism of ethno-racial control. The two institutions, Wacqauant maintains, are in a symbiotic relationship with equivalent practices of stigmatisation, disciplinary surveillance, and embodied confinement. Movements between the two institutions occur seamlessly to contain politically marginalised populations whose low- and un-skilled labour is economically exploited. Illuminating though Wacquant's analysis of racialised political economy is, it is primarily a macro-level account not centred on individual subjectivity and experience.

Further, where there *are* similarities between imprisonment and *experiencing* racism at the individual level is in the existential condition of being denied humanity and where shame, distaste, and disgust are deeply inscribed (Fanon 1967/2008; Crewe 2015). Sykes (1958: 79)

saw prisoners' dehumanisation being acutely felt, challenging prisoners' self-concepts in a deeply ontological sense, generating pain and hurt 'directed against the very foundations of the prisoner's being'. To Sykes' older pains Crewe (2011) adds 'softer', but no less brutal new pains of imprisonment in neoliberal times. Specifically, Crewe references the often crippling uncertainty prisoners face regarding their sentence and release conditions, as they are compelled to engage in self-governing compliance amidst the impersonal and unpredictable wielding of psychological power through monitoring and surveillance by prison staff. Extending Sykes' insights, Crewe (2011) employs the metrics of *depth* and *weight*, *breadth*, *looseness* and *tightness* to capture more precisely the complexity of prisoner experience. This framework is well- suited to specifying the contours of racializing processes and racism in neoliberal times[2], both descriptively and analytically expressing magnitude and intensity across multiple domains with attention also paid to emotion and ontology.

For Crewe (2011, 2015), the *depth* of penal power, sometimes referred to as the *weight* of being incarcerated encompasses both systemic and relational processes. It symbolises the psychologically oppressive burden of incarceration and the sense it produces of feeling buried far beneath the surface of freedom. The depth of penal power is signified in the literal and metaphorical segregation of the prisoner from the outside world, physically, emotionally, and morally. Life is governed by the systemic conditions of imprisonment, such as the quality of the food, but also relationally, depending on how staff exercise their power and use discretion. Significantly, prison officers also operate with an implicit or explicit sense of their moral superiority to prisoners (Crewe *et al.* 2014)[3]. In Crewe's framework, *breadth* signifies the reach of state disciplinary power into civil society and its ongoing exclusionary potential through employment discrimination against prisoners and disenfranchisement from political and social rights. It also encompasses how ex-prisoners' lives are shaped by feelings of shame and difficulties in trusting personal and intimate relationships. Crewe uses the notion of *looseness* to convey how prison life is shaped by a less physical and authoritarian use of power than in the past, but where arbitrary inconsistencies in rule enforcement creates confusion and doubt. Finally, the *tightness* metaphor is preferred by Crewe to depict more precisely the softer, more diffuse yet pervasive forms of penal power. Remotely operated and opaque processes of categorisation and disciplining by psychologists and prison officers determine access to services and privileges, and are thus, keenly felt. In what follows, this analytical framework is applied to the life stories of young minority ethnic Londoners and their racialized realities, but firstly a note on method.

Method

As it is in the ordinary routines and encounters of everyday life - in the street, on public transport, at school, in shops, clubs, and workplaces - that the contours of racial orders are mobilised (and contested) and existential subjectivities formed, life story narratives present an invaluable means to study how racial meanings circulate (Essed 1991; Harries 2016). They enable delving into the interface between structure and moral and emotional landscapes to examine how social processes enable or thwart. Life histories are often crafted from existing cultural repertoires, drawing individual meaning from collective experiences of injustice in the case of minority ethnic groups (Knowles 1999). Acknowledging though, Plummer's (2010: 149) quip that inevitably 'most life stories are the victims of major amputations', means accepting that a life story is inherently partial

and selective, as pasts are reconstructed to effect meaningful coherence and a moral identity by the teller. But they can also elicit self-reflective moments of meaning-making as thoughts and feelings about life events and relationships are recalled (Hubbard 2000). They also counterbalance the methodological limitation that a thematic lens overplays the significance of race; a life story approach permits processes of racialisation to be interrogated only when they emerge in the broader frame of experience (Rampton and Harris 2009; Essed 1991).

While the cognitive ability to construct a life narrative develops during adolescence (Habermas and Bluck 2000), there is increasing interest in the period of emerging adulthood (age 18-29 years). This is a developmental phase characterised by increasing independence, yet also introspective self-focus and identity development, but where race has yet to be fully scrutinised (Syed and Mitchell 2013). Narrative data collected at this life stage affords considerable potential for illuminating the ontological impact of racial positioning in young people exposed to lived multiculture - and its' potential for conviviality – for the entirety of their lives (Back 1996; Gilroy 2004; Harries 2016; Neal *et al.* 2013; Amin 2002).

By tapping into young people's lives there is also the advantage of near reflection on childhood experiences with less reliance on distant memory recall. At the same time, asking about hopes for the future at a key child-adult transition embraces the notion of an ongoing life still to be lived with all its imagined possibilities, but importantly, also its constraints. And of course, life stories are continually renewed through the creative perceptions of listeners, including researchers, who engage in story deconstruction and interpretation, alert to the contradictions and inconsistencies revealed and how they trouble narrators (Frank 2010; but see Kim 2008 for a critique of the power dynamics involved).

A purposive sample of 20 minority ethnic male[4] research participants aged 16-25 were drawn from a volunteer pool in contact with community development and sports organisations, mosques, and other youth groups, in four London boroughs in 2017. These organisations worked with young people vulnerable to economic disadvantage, discrimination, exclusion, and crime, offering targeted programmes, educational development and individual support. The sample was ethnically diverse, but with an overrepresentation of young, black men. Six were of black African origin (Gambian, Ghanaian, Nigerian, Sierra Leonean), seven were of black Caribbean origin (Dominican, Guyanese, Jamaican, Trinidadian), five were of mixed race origin (mainly white and black African or Caribbean), and two were Asian (Bangladeshi and Pakistani)[5]. They were predominantly Christian or agnostic, but included four Muslims. The interviews were conducted by the author and a Co-Investigator, both of minority ethnic origin[6].

The interview invited participants to generate chronological narratives relating to early childhood memories, cultural and religious traditions, school, friendships, neighbourhood, crime, formative relationships with family, friends and intimates, as well as significant life events, turning points, and hopes for the future. This recognised the (previously identified) challenge young men, in particular, often find with entirely unstructured conversations. Notwithstanding, the interviews were not conducted in a prescriptive way, and they often meandered and were not strictly ordered by time, instead

reflecting the biographical meaning of particular moments for individuals. During the interviews a series of photos were also shown to elicit reactions informed by personal experiences. The research participants were interviewed on two or three occasions over a period of around three weeks. The interviews ranged in duration from just under one hour to 3 hours and 19 minutes and were audio-recorded following informed consent procedures. Additional notes recorded researchers' reflexive observations of the interview encounter.

The recordings were transcribed verbatim with participant-provided pseudonyms maintaining anonymity. NVIVO 12 framework analysis maintained the integrity and meaning of the individual narratives while also facilitating thematic analyses across the sample. Preliminary nodes deductively developed linked to the chronology of each interview (as described above), but these were subsequently inductively overlaid by emergent themes and pertinent issues for participants. The remainder of this paper draws from the analysis of these data and their application of Crewe's (2011, 2015) framework of *depth, weight, breadth, looseness* and *tightness*. It does this first through the narrating of H's life story, followed by further illustrations from across the sample.

H's Life Story, So Far

H, a young man of 22 at the time of interview, was born in Britain to parents of Sierra Leonean and Gambian Muslim origin. H was the only boy in his family of four children and he had lived without his father's active presence in his life. Intermittently employed, he perceived a racialized and classed distinction between black people like himself and white majority society. His narrative described an objective and subjective distance signalling the *depth* outlined in Crewe's (2011) framework. H was astute in recognising the racialised variation in life experiences for young black boys like him ('my people') who are 'having drama from different angles', particularly the threats of racist stereotyping and serious youth violence. This was in marked contrast to his phantasy of an affluent young white man whose 'parents are making, like, £10,000 a month…he wouldn't even have a clue what I'm talking about.' H was acutely aware of the racist stereotypes circulating about young black men in society, recognising that white individuals might not want to build friendships with black people if they see them as 'hungry savages', 'gangbangers', 'will kill someone for anything', or 'probably an angry guy'. Present in this understanding are the familiar, racist and essentialist masculine tropes of barbarity, aggression, and criminality redolent of Yancy's (2017) depiction of the 'black monster'. H's response to how such stereotypes might be applied to him combined fatalistic acceptance with an unwavering desire to maintain a positive identity divorced from how he was perceived by others. '[W]hen people are thinking, they're just thinking. They don't know', was how he put it. Symbolically, H demarcates the gendered boundaries too, noting that black girls are 'smart', avoiding the dangers of youth violence linked to drug-selling and neighbourhood beefs where 'people will come and stab you to death, shoot you, do whatever'. Salisbury-Joseph's (2019) black mixed-race men similarly observed yet resisted their mis-constructed racialized and gendered identities as they 'wrangled with the black (hyper)masculine monster'.

Pointing to the systemic nature of racial conditions in society, H communicates an awareness of blocked opportunities where '[i]t'll probably take you a lifetime trying to change it' and where '[s]ome black people lost hope in the system, so it's like they, it's like,

like, they believe that the system can't help them anymore or the system don't wanna help them, so- and they have- like, they're just stuck in a corner'. The racialized exercise of power was evident in H's talk of the workplace, with the degree and *weight* of oppression H felt underlined:

> '[03:30]…maybe it's the way I talk, the way - maybe the way I dress or the way I look. I don't know, but - like, for example, I meet someone. As soon as I walk into the workplace, like, they're already, already looking at me like - maybe like one of the black boys on the streets that are doing stupid stuff, selling drugs… that's one of the first conversations that someone will ask me, like, "What, do you sell drugs?" Or, "Are you in a gang?" or stuff like that…[07:30] So as a black boy, like, growing up, growing up in this country and things are tight for you like that, you can't get a job…People are giving you stereotypes... *It's like you can't be normal with normal people because they don't see you as normal*.'

Here there is a palpable sense of the normativity of whiteness, the burden of negative perception and of being read as inferior. This is the fixedness of the white gaze that Yancy (2017) refers to, which renders the black body invisible and simultaneously hypervisible. Guilt is judged *a priori*, attached to any black body, denying dignity and self-worth and projecting a monstrous vision of immorality, wickedness and criminality. In H's account there is also a hint of the alienation and dislocation that Fanon (1967/2008) describes, of H being positioned in a zone of non-being, where his blackness negates the possibilities of normality and acceptance. This is resonant of the 'crushing objecthood' Fanon (1967/2008) describes in the Look a Negro moment as he is positioned as a source of fear. Self-doubt is evident too with H considering his culpability linked to self-presentation through accent, dress and comportment. And perhaps Hage (2010) is right in maintaining that this disintegration is all the more painful and traumatising when the recipient hopes for universality and believes they are doing all that they can to be part of mainstream society – in H's case seeking integration through employment.

Predictably, policing was cited as a key institutional site where racism and discrimination was at play. Describing feeling beleaguered, labelled, and perennially pursued with the worst always assumed by police officers, H is unequivocal in his belief that 'any opportunity they have to violate you, they'll just take it'. He recounts a positive incident diminished by police suspicion when he is asked by his sister to buy a decorating paintbrush from their local shops just after she has returned home after giving birth. Remembering the excitement of becoming an uncle, H describes riding his nephew's bike and going in and out of several local shops to find the paintbrush. He is stopped and searched by 'undercovers' who put their hands into his pocket, questioning who the bike belongs to and whether he is selling drugs in the shops he visited. H is positioned within a static racial typology rooted in an historical imaginary which has been stubbornly resistant to alternative constructions even in the 21st century (Yancy 2017). It is this toxic omnipresence which creates an ongoing stressor for minorities.

H's reaction is revealing when he is shown a deliberately provocative image of a young black man surrounded by seven uniformed police officers including one with a riot shield. One officer has two hands placed on the young man's neck, a second officer grips the young man's shoulders, a third has his hand on the top of his head steadying it as a fourth

officer takes an identification photo. H notes simply but pointedly, 'They're scared of him'. Their physical domination of the young black man is understood by H to be a representation of their fear and assumption of his dangerousness. The weight of this objectification is borne by H and others like him increased the likelihood of self-fulfilling prophecies being borne of these conflictual interactions and judgements:

> things like that, you know, some people, like, when they do it to them, that's it, they just lose hope. You're like, 'Cool. Fuck it. That's me. I might as well be like that [a drug dealer] if I'm gonna- they're gonna stop me every day, search me, ask me about things that I didn't do'.

How deep the experience of racialisation goes can also be expressed by its *breadth*. This term is used by Crewe (2015) to conceptualise how penal power extends beyond the prison. Here it is applied to illustrate the way processes of racialisation permeate spaces of multiculture and are not only the preserve of the majority white group. Depicted in H's account is the breadth and reach of racial power in ways which defy a simplistic binaristic logic. It is used here to denote the upholding of racial hierarchies by minority groups themselves, the permeation of racial stereotyping into settings where the instigators are themselves also racialized by white power structures. H strikes a poignant tone as he recalls economically and politically marginalised minority whites maintaining racialized hierarchies in his neighbourhood, as race adapts to new migrations:

> they were just a lot of stereotypes man, trust me Fam. Me, I work in the construction, as a labourer, when I go work, a lot of people asked me, they ['white workers, Romanians, Polish'] said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm working." They said, "But, you black boys don't work. Like, you're always outside, like, just on the streets." I said, "Fine, but that's not me, man, I'm working like", do you know what I mean? (Sighs)

These white workers who face their own tyrannies of white majority racism experience economic and political precarity as the older legacies of racism sit alongside newer forms of racialisation. The ways in which minority ethnic groups, differentially subordinated in fluid, racial hierarchies, interact and engage, both convivially and conflictually, has increasingly become an area of interest, including shared experiences of racism (Wessendorf 2013; Harris 2016). Back's (1996) earlier work highlighted the uneven configuration of racist sentiments in South London whereby Vietnamese young people were excluded from more racially mixed white and black friendship groups (see also Hewitt 1986). In his later work too he recognized the ways that some racisms are muted at the same time others flourish. Using a biographical case study of Charlynne, a black Dominican woman, Back et al. (2012:150) describe how she finds herself facing white state power that has donned a black mask in the form of a black immigration officer. Neo-imperial hierarchies of belonging emerge as the 'social weight of racism' seeps into sites of multiculture. Minorities are misrecognized and they misrecognize others - a far cry from conjured 'saccharine diversity fantasies' (Back and Sinha 2016: 523). Back et al. remind us of Fanon's contribution, where the colonised are co-opted by colonisers to re-inscribe racial hierarchies as they see others through the colonizer's lens.

For Crewe (2015), the *looseness* of penal power brings confusion and ambiguity through the soft power of psychological coercion. Prisoners' everyday is overseen by 'friendly' officers whose informal interactions are designed to root out security threats, creating an

inauthentic climate of distrust. This exercise of power is no less potent, and so too with racializing experiences. The emergence of more subtle, covert forms of racialization and racism in contrast to more blatant and explicit forms has been widely acknowledged as a feature of the contemporary landscape. For H, the hidden racism of certain actions was a ubiquitous concern:

> you've gotta remember, nowadays, the black person, a lot of people can look at you with a smile on your face, but behind closed doors, you know, they're thinking about something else.

Notwithstanding, the looseness of contemporary racializing practices was less clearly articulated in H's narrative. Perhaps of more significance was the way that he chose to navigate these threats, dismissing them as obstacles on his path of self-improvement as he remained resolute against internalizing negative stereotyping. Engaging the amputation that Fanon (1967/2008) articulated as the wilful rejection of white narratives of inferior blackness H said this:

> At the end of the day, I know what I know and I stick to my plans and my choices what I do. You can say, like, yeah, I'm a drug dealer or I look like a drug dealer, dress like a drug dealer, talk like a drug dealer, but me, myself, I know I'm not. I know every day I'm waking up, "I'm going work today", or, "Tomorrow I'm trying to invest in my business plans or focus on my career."

H spoke of a certain future of economic self-reliance, with success and dignity only assured if he set up his own business; a common route to occupational advancement when employment options are reduced by discrimination (Metcalf *et al.* 1996).

The *tightness* and *grip* metaphors are used by Crewe (2011, 2015) to depict the invasive, enveloping, demanding nature of penal power. Applied here they convey the chronic disadvantages and intense pressures some minority ethnic young people face where racism is not the only structural dynamic of significance. Difficult life circumstances linked to economic marginalisation, fractured families, and social isolation, were prevalent. As an almost onomatopoeic descriptor, tightness signals an essence of powerlessness and constraint, of being hemmed in with limited options for manoeuvring towards positive outcomes.

This is illustrated by H's employment and housing situation at the time the second interview was conducted. Although expecting permanent work on a construction site, H had been employed for only five days, receiving £64 for one day's work but only £129 for the remaining four days. Perceiving this as 'someone's trying to rip me off', H sought to negotiate further payment. Meanwhile H has to register for housing benefit and seek new employment or risk losing his accommodation. This consequential concertina effect marks out the precarious – those Shildrick et al. (2012) recognise as trapped shuttling in the 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' between low-paid subsistence labour and unemployment with knock-on effects for housing and welfare, more generally. Its racially segregated dimensions feature prominently in Wacquant's (2008) *Urban Outcasts* in the discussion of Chicago where wage labour exclusion and welfare institutional depletion can be contrasted with the bannlieues of France where the harms of economic deregulation are partially mitigated by grassroots organisations and public services.

H then describes his frustrated attempts to attend an arranged meeting with an employment adviser which requires him to take a shortcut through the Olympic Park in Stratford. As the shortcut had been temporarily closed off, he pleads with a black security officer to allow him through, offering to be searched first. The request is denied and as he tries to seek access elsewhere, a black security manager asks for his name as he reports the incident to the police. In narrating these difficulties, there is a frantic desperation evident as H talks, as he expresses exasperation at the collusion and obstruction by other black men:

> So I said, "Listen, I don't care if I'm allowed or not allowed. I asked you nicely. I said, "I need to go to this place. *Like, this is my life. It's important. You clearly know*, like. You can search me if you want. I'm not coming here to harm nobody or something. I'm just going past because I need to get to the place behind the stadium… *when it comes to things like that, I can't take it. But, like, I try and be humble, but things like that, I can't take it because, like, like, you're taking me, like- you're trying to make me just like the stereotypes* you're giving me, like. You're taking my name and giving it to police when it's not needed…it gets really sticky sometimes, you know… *you have no control of it. You can't do nothing about it fo- that's the sad thing. You talk, police will come, lock you up, put you in the cells.* What-? *It doesn't matter how much you talk, how much you fight. It doesn't matter what you do, they always win…*

H's infuriation is amplified by his deep dislike of the police - they 'take the piss', they can be smiling in your face, but deep down (kissing teeth)…'. It is also consistent with Fanon's designation of the black subject whose self-image becomes fragmented amidst the devastating fact of anti-blackness from which there seems no escape, even from similarly racialized others.

However it would be inaccurate to depict the tightness of racialisation and racism in H's life by only referring to the structural harms of precarious employment and hostile policing. A more expansive understanding which goes beyond a Wacqauntian (2009) political economic analysis of the welfare and penal fields, situates H's experience in an intersectional and diasporic backstory in which his identity as a Muslim man in a devout family of women foregrounded his early life experiences. H's childhood had been marred by the harshness of familial separation as he was sent to live with an Imam and his family in Senegal aged six. He noted poignantly 'I was just crying for my Mum…every day' and 'I did have love. It's just that, you know, I didn't see it'. H spoke tearfully of feeling unnurtured as a small child and of feeling only loved at a distance (while confirming his wish to continue with the interview because 'I don't like running away from the truth, innit? Every time I say it hurts but, you know, I'll get over it one day').

Seeking an assured, religious upbringing in a predominantly Muslim country, H's migration was, for his family, about forging a transnational religious and cultural identity. This micro-mobility is inscribed with historical connections that are colonial in nature, but also reflecting a shared Muslim identification. H's present is configured through and, symbolic of, a loose connection to the Gambia, filtered laterally through life in Senegal (also previously a European colony), to an African Muslim sense of collectivity in London.

He received a strict Islamic education at a religious school where he had learned Arabic and studied the Quran. H had experienced physical beatings there ('I've still got scars on my legs'), and this and the rupture from his family at the time had ongoing detrimental effects for him as a young adult. The anguish evident in his encounter with the black security staff in the Olympic Park reflects H's urgent need to have housing independence to maintain a distance from his mother. Accepting that she had wanted for him to be raised in ways which were religiously binding and culturally enriching, their relationship had still been fractious on his return, although somewhat eased by him moving, after a period of sofa-hopping, into permanent hostel accommodation.

For H, the interaction in the Olympic Park has significance beyond the encounter itself. There is the disappointment of not having permanent employment; a challenge for young black men who are also often educationally disenfranchised ('Emails, jobs, jobs, jobs, reject, reject, reject, reject'). This stark economic vulnerability is coupled with a raw feeling of anger at being treated with contempt when he challenges the administrator at the construction company. The cumulative effect on his housing security illustrates the contingency of economically precarious lives, but is also bound up in conflictual familial relationships. His reaction seemed tied to the fear, loneliness, and helplessness he experienced as a child in Senegal and his later, forced withdrawal from college because he could not afford transport costs. What Mahadeo (2019: 189) calls the 'cognitive labor associated with being black ' is entwined with a religious sensibility which cannot be shorn of its prior association, but nor can its connection to family poverty. In the moment, H is entangled by a powerlessness of the past and present, and potentially the future, and this is aggravated by ever-present risks of surveillance and social control, even from others like him (the black security guard and manager), who '*clearly know*' the troubles of black hypervisibility. The rawness of H's narrative is readily apparent, the tightness felt as being compressed from all sides by the weight of economic precarity and poor working conditions, poverty, racist stereotyping and discrimination, police surveillance, troubled family relationships, and the risks of violent victimisation. The oppression cannot easily be reduced to racialisation, however. H's story derives its complexity from his situatedness at the intersection of multiple subordinate identities linked to race, ethnicity, class, religion, and a colonial past and present. H's material and affective sense of belonging is permeated by what Alexander (2019: 232) calls 'elsewheres and elsewhens'. In the present, H's life is rooted in cultural attachments to London, and to Senegal; a mash-up of diasporic connections framed by structural conditions and infused with the performative possibilities and constraints of black Muslim life in London. His early hardship is re-characterised as enabling of a brighter future; the discipline and inner strength which came from his strict Islamic education preventing a criminal lifestyle, prison, or death from youth violence.

Life narratives such as H's collected over time establish a sense of temporality, and perhaps more importantly, when researching with young men, enable the building of trust. During the second interview that was conducted in H's hostel, his increasingly conflictual interaction with the construction company administrator was observed in real-time as he showed me emails that expressed his mounting vexation at her belligerence. The unfolding research relationship built momentum to develop a more nuanced understanding of H's life lived so far. There is also, however, significant value in comparing across narratives, with cross-sectional analyses offering a partial response to

the criticism of tiny life history sample sizes (Thomson and Holland 2003). The remainder of the paper draws from multiple narratives to engage with the *depth* and *weight, breadth, looseness*, and *tightness* of racializing processes.

Depth/Weight, Breadth, Looseness and Tightness Across the Sample

Returning to Crewe's (2011, 2015) framework, across the interviews there was a similar refrain to H's, communicating the *depth* of racially organised lives, underpinned by historical racial configurations of slavery and empire. Understanding race as a structuring logic, these perspectives encompassed a politicised awareness of the materiality of race and its symbolic effects to produce systemic conditions in which black people are positioned at the bottom of the social structure. Asserting an objective positioning as distinct from mainstream white society, Cairo, a young man of black Jamaican origin said this:

> …the white man made the system, the Asian man, he's the middle man… White man is at the top of the food chain… when you go parliament every single person is white inside parliament. There might be a little black person, you think he's got power, he's just there to make it look like all balanced…Discrimination, that's why we're at the bottom, so we're going to be poor.

The disconnection and alienation from white majority society was also present when participants spoke of instances of discrimination in institutional settings. The depiction of a hierarchical order structuring social relations was evident in Tyrone's narrative when he discussed working as a lift engineer and seeing others promoted before him, including one he himself had trained. Tyrone's ire was also directed at the police based on an experience he had had as a small child in which their deeply embedded, racist hostility was generationally communicated. He recounted an interaction where his father had been arrested at home. Tyrone had asked to join his father, excited by the possibilities of riding in an emergency vehicle with flashing lights. The police's chilling retort, "Oh, you will one day," had stayed with him into young adulthood, as did his father's repressed anger at this racist humiliation. When shown the same picture H saw of a young black man surrounded by seven police officers, Ashad, of Pakistani Muslim origin, also picked up this theme:

> I kind of see a sense of humiliation with this man. Obviously, I don't know what he's done, he could have done something really bad, er, but, erm, yeah, I mean, I just kind of feel, it's not necessary to have that many people on one man, and handling him this way.

Reminiscent of Fanon's (1964: 21) recognition of how black men are 'looked down upon, despised, confined within the labyrinth of his epiderm', this speaks to confinement by racial origins. Jack too noted the asymmetrical policing of public space in which recreational drug-taking or youthful mischief is simply denied people like him:

> 20, 30 white boys outside a youth club smack [heroin]- they was doing, they was doing some stuff, like. And it was, there was, *they was just being white lads, they were just being young lads. Black people cannot do that.*
> (Jack, black British Jamaican)

These institutional exchanges occurred alongside more relational encounters. Joseph was perplexed by girls at his secondary school reporting not being allowed by their fathers to have a black or Asian boyfriend. Tailing off – 'I'm thinking, everyone's the same, it's just, I don't know'' conveys the confusing nature of this for Joseph. Such reflections on black inferiority and dangerousness were present in other interviewees' accounts, including Steve's, a young man who like Joseph was of black Ghanaian origin. In Steve's narration, a gendered racism was perceived in an uncomfortable encounter with his white girlfriend's father:

> her father was like, like I see it in my eyes… he's got something about me, that he doesn't like… [Interviewer: How do you know it was your race that he didn't like?]…he came in…he was just like, bare [very] happy with everyone, but he didn't know I was in, because I was upstairs. And then, he came upstairs, and I was like, "Are you alright?" And then he was like, "Are you alright?" And then, a couple of minutes later he goes downstairs, and was like, "He needs to go home." Like that, or I was in my head, "I was thinking, why do I need to go home now?" Like, it was at seven o'clock. But it just hurt, the son's [white and younger] girlfriend was still in the house... I just felt like there was some sort of disrespect there.

In these instances – of which there were many across the sample – the deeply embedded nature of racial meanings are evident, underpinned by historical ideologies of white domination. The heaviness of racist expression is powerfully evoked in the life stories; Steve's pain is resonant of the traumatic assault on a sense of self that Yancy's (2017) work highlights, where being judged, humiliated, and treated with contempt disregards one's humanity.

Signalling the lateral direction of racist currents is nowhere more explicit than in the playground, construction site, and street, where racism is simple in its familiarity yet shockingly powerful in its utterance when it comes from the mouths of other black and brown bodies. This *breadth*, for Fanon (1964), resulted from internalised racial hierarchies overlaid by white racism. In multicultural London there is a stubborn resilience to negative racialisation and its dynamics, the power of which is indicated in its use by minorities themselves. Danny, of black British Nigerian origin, remembered ongoing racialized interactions with Bangladeshi children in which he and his black friends had been called 'n******'. While resisting the dangers of over-reading the racial elements of these kinds of youthful, masculine contests and ongoing skirmishes (Alexander 2000; Song 2014), it is not insignificant that Danny refers to his as having had 'proper, proper issues with the Asians for a good few months where they were, like, you know, practically after me or after my head'. Like H, Dee's black boyfriend had been racially abused, called a 'monkey' and told "Go eat your banana" by white Europeans she identified as Polish. For Rafan, of Bangladeshi Muslim origin, a question about black over-representation in criminality produced a negative response, 'Because they're black… it is what it is, to be honest'. The point is that racial slurs are readily available and can be applied by minority ethnic groups, as James' extract also reveals:

> So I'll be dressed nice, in a suit… I'll be on the train, for example, like on a really busy train with people going to work …You'll see some white

people just holding their bags to themselves. *This won't just be white people, it will be Indian, Asian*, it happens… *Sometimes it's strong, sometimes it's weak, but I can still feel it.* There's always that sense of fear, and they show it through the actions, not even their mind this time.
(James, mixed white French and black Congolese and Gabonian)

The *looseness* of racialization speaks to the blurred boundaries of what constitutes racism for those on the receiving end. A post-racial sensibility amplifies the second-guessing now its forms may be obscured in more subtle actions. The young men distinguished racisms of the past and present in these interview extracts:

You don't see it in your face, back then a guy will run up to you and just call you n***** or just attack you. It's more subliminal, people keep it within their little group.
(Cairo, black Jamaican)

people are-they're racial, but they won't say it to you, but they have racial thoughts, innit? So that's the, that the worst one, the ones where they're looking but they don't say it to you because they probably know you'll knock [hit] them like.
(Mike, mixed white French and black Ivorian Coast)

The *tightness* of racialization emerged in some although not all of the young men's stories. Linguistically expressing its sensory referent in an almost onomataepaic sense,, the *tightness* of racializing tendencies is indicated in Mike's experience of immigration detention and deportation, and the resultant separation from his daughter. His stuttering talk, with barely concealed fury, centres on the contestation of his right to be in Britain *by other minorities* when he is held in an immigration detention centre:

…I was born here…they wasn't even white British people. *They were Asians, Africans or whatever, telling me that I am ge- that I am not born in this country when I've got my bir- birth certificate in front of them and my eyes. And they're telling me what, like- they made me let out so much rage, like…*you know people, they say, yeah, they've got trauma? *But I wouldn't say, like, I've got trauma, but I have. Do you understand?* So I know, but even, like, when I argue or angry, like, sometimes I can, I can really, like, temper up. Do you get me? *That's because of them. They've done that to me.*

Refracting the breadth of racialisation, Mike referred to these experiences as 'making me be racist', as contestations of his right to belong to the British nation-state were made by Asian asylum-seekers 'who are just making me wanna just go [Incredible] Hulk [7]and smash everything up'. The complex entanglements of race and nation pit minorities against each other in a late modern iteration of geopolitics with postcolonial inflections. The durability and availability of racial hierarchies in the present chimes with Nahaboo (2015: 150) suggestion that we are witnessing 'an unprecedented shift in how racialized British citizens are able to constitute themselves for the first time as generators of state racism, rather than primary recipients'. Once again this underscores the need for a more nuanced conceptualization of racism imbued with an analysis of political economy for as Wacquant (2005: 43) astutely notes 'the deployment of the penal apparatus to deal with immigration enables Europe to shun facing its deep-seated entanglement in the fate of the postcolonial societies of its former empire as well as the multifarious forms of social and

state ostracization that continue to derail the path of non-European migrants in national life even as they gain legal status'.

Conclusion

The expansive nature of the term racism has led some to question its validity in assisting our understanding of complex interactions between and within minority and majority ethnic groups. There is a risk that racism has become a catch-all 'sandtrap or sinkhole concept' which obscures as much as it reveals (Gans 2012: 126). Enactments of race are differently endowed moreover, and without a means to register different forms, gradations and intensities, the concept of racism labours under too heavy a conceptual burden. Applying a metric that attempts to descriptively and analytically delineate processes of racialization and racism offers a more comprehensive understanding than the binary of 'racist' and 'non-racist' in sites of multiculture in 21st century London.

There is both simplicity and complexity in these young minority ethnic Londoners' accounts. There continues to be an oppressive racializing ecology that makes accessible more limited material, political, and social resources and opportunities for those outside of the white majority ethnic group. The life stories vividly show the pains of racialization and racism and how it impacts their lives in often profound ways, represented in the metrics of depth and weight. Systemic conditions bear a colonial imprint that harm the life chances of minority groups. The effects can be material in reducing opportunities to access employment, for example, or in attracting discriminatory actions by the police. The consequences can be symbolic in the relational communication of perceptions of inferiority, dangerousness, and alienation and exclusion from the white majority. These processes evince emotional responses including anger, anxiety, confusion, and sadness and feelings of dejection, envy, frustration, helplessness, hopelessness, humiliation, pride, stoicism and vexation. Corporeally felt, the exercise of white racial domination ensures gendered, racialised attributions continue to demean, degrade, and discombobulate.
In this sense there is an uncomfortable and unconscionable simplicity to processes of racialization and racism. Yet this belies newer forms where belonging is contested by other minority ethnic groups, themselves positioned below the white majority in putative racial hierarchies. This underscores the need to sharpen how we think about race's familiar but also its new configurations engendered through migration. While there is certainly a need for caution lest such understandings give an alibi to racist power dynamics within the white ethnic group, our understandings of how the breadth of racialisation and racism works is nevertheless impoverished without studying all forms of social relations. Likewise, account needs to be taken of the haziness, the looseness of racializing processes which muddies how they can be defined, interpreted and responded to by those subject to them.

While the racial ordinary continues to shape experiences and to produce racial harms in everyday life, the young minority ethnic Londoners' life stories lay bare complexity not entirely accounted for by experiences of racialization and racism. The metaphor of tightness powerfully signifies other ways in which lives are constricted by structural, institutional, and cultural factors. Employment insecurity, often in the low-wage sector, and poverty are not exclusively a minority ethnic experience, but they are more prevalent among minority ethnic groups. The same can be said for threats to individuals' right to belong to Britain and the fraught vulnerability of migrant status. At any time these

circumstances can coalesce to thwart, envelop, and grip in ways which compound limited life chances and prevent positive life outcomes. They contribute to the weight of layers of disadvantage, marginalization, and discrimination fueling the ongoing denigration of black masculinities. The resilience and cumulative damage does not mean racialization has not also been transformed, but it is in the more sensitive measurement that our understanding is enhanced. The metrics of depth/weight, breadth, looseness and tightness enable a more precise specification and texturing of these dynamics, although they may risk less fully engaging with the political economy that undergirds these manifestations at the individual level. As an organizing framework these metrics offer an analytical step towards marrying more comprehensively objective empirical realities with embodied, subjective experience. That these must continue to be understood through the structural prism of globalised racial orders is evident here with the last word going to H:

> Er, if it wasn't for black people, your country wouldn't have a lot of things that they have now. The last thing you can do is just let us in your country and just let us work, at least try and make a way out. You know what I mean? Come on, man. If you never came to our country and took us, like, you wouldn't have been in your position.

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[1] Lifetime risk of imprisonment was 1 in 3 for black men and 1 in 17 white men in 2001 (Bonczar 2003).

[2] In a footnote, Ngo (2016) uses the measure of 'breadth' to denote the commonality of a fear of criminality evoked in the same or different ways among black men. 'Depth' signals the long, systemic history of racism embedded in the public and political imagination.

[3] *Lightness* captures positive social relations between prison officers and prisoners in which the latter's individuality and humanity is recognised (Crewe *et al.* 2014).

[4] The sample included one mixed race woman who was the partner of one of the male respondents and who was keen to speak with the researchers.

[5] One participant identified as white but talked about his Indian grandfather.

[6] Black/Mixed Race and Asian/Indian with origins in East Africa.

[7] Marvel Comics character who transforms from human to super-strong and angry when experiencing stress or danger.