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Identity in whose eyes?: the role of representations in identity construction

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Identity in Whose Eyes? The Role of Representations in Identity Construction

The aim of this paper is to address the question: what impact do others' representations have on the construction of identity. A study of the social identities of teenagers living in Brixton, South London, reveals the dialectic between identity and representation. The first section describes the research context, sets out the procedure to the 7 focus groups with a total of 44 school students (girls and boys from a variety of cultural backgrounds from three different secondary schools), and explains the process of computer-assisted qualitative analysis. In the second section I describe the findings. In exploring the different strategies teenagers use in the development of positive social identities and self-esteem, particularly in relation to black teenagers, the dynamic and contested nature of identity comes to the fore. These findings are then used, in section three, to demonstrate the value of incorporating social representations into social identity and self-categorisation theories. This demands a critical review of these theories and highlights the importance of representations in the construction of identity.

As Tajfel realised over twenty years ago, “we live in a world in which the processes of unification and diversification proceed apace, both of them faster than ever before” (Tajfel, 1978). As a consequence questions of identity, group membership and representation pervade daily interactions in contemporary societies. Urbanisation, migration, globalisation, new medias and modern technologies threaten the stability of both social identities (Rutherford, 1990) and collective representations (Moscovici, 1984). There are constant pressures on many of us to examine and re-examine our different identities against the flux of unstable representations around us. Identity theorists must keep apace of the changing nature of our social environments and ascertain whether or not our theories can account for the changing nature of identity.

One of the key aims of this study is to do just this through an analysis of the social identities of young people living in a stigmatised area of South London, Brixton. As a place characterised by multiethnic identities, competing representations of communities, diverse racisms and various assertions of community pride Brixton is an

ideal place to research the relationship between representation and identity. Through this research in a real-life setting the impact of others' representations on identity is assessed. This demands a critical review of social psychological theories of identity and calls for a more dialectical approach to researching identity in context.

1. Context, Methods and Participants

While Brixton does not exist as a political ward or geographical region in its own right, it clearly exists within social discourses about the area. Brixton falls within the borough of Lambeth. Brixton, like Lambeth, has a history of multiculturalism. There are approximately 110 languages spoken in the area (London Research Centre, 1999)ⁱ. As one of the research participants said themselves - Brixton is "the most mixed place in England. ... I think that when you go to Brixton, even though there is a majority of black people around, there are like, like one of every kind in Brixton" (Francesⁱⁱ). If anything the most distinctive feature of Brixton is its polymerism and its celebration of difference. It is, therefore, a fascinating place to study contemporary social identities. The wealth of cultural diversity, the mixing and merging of different traditions, foods, musics and peoples, and the pride and prejudice which emerge from this multiculturalism all highlight the interplay between identity and representation.

While there is much community pride within the area, representations of Brixton in the media and in wider society in general tend to be extremely negative, focusing on social and economic problems. These representations endorse a version of Brixton as divided and disadvantaged by racism, poverty and crime. There are many social statistics from Lambeth, Brixton's borough, that support this. For example:

- Lambeth ranks as the 12th most severely deprived out of 354 local authority districts in England (DETR Index of Local Deprivation, April 1998).

- Lambeth has the 5th highest crime rate in London (Metropolitan Police, 1998). It has either the highest or second highest levels of certain types of crime (burglary, sex crime, robbery and violent crime).
- Many young black people in Brixton are victims of racial abuse and violence (Metropolitan Police, 1998).

The divergence between insiders' and outsiders' representations of Brixton is striking to any casual observer (<http://www.brixton.co.uk>). The aim of my research is to explore this divergence and to assess the relationship between these representations and the construction of identity. Because of the exploratory nature of the research focus groups are the most appropriate method by which to create a safe and stimulating context for the discussion of how Brixton 'is' and how it is represented from the point of view of those who live there.

Focus groups are increasingly recognised as a valuable resource in community research as they provide a way of moving beyond an "essentially individualistic framework" (Puddifoot, 1995, p.364) and examining the inter-subjective level of social identities. Some focus group researchers advocate creating groups with complex relationships and diverse views to achieve rich and in-depth material (e.g. Schatzman and Strauss, 1973). This strategy has considerable benefits. As the data below illustrate, conflict and differences of opinion within the group forced participants to clarify their position, expose their attachment to particular representations, and admit weaknesses in their own position. The requirement that groups were friends made it possible for controversial, and sometimes personally upsetting, topics to be discussed with both empathy and respect.

Researching the construction of identity directed the choice of adolescents between 12 and 16 years as primary informants, as is common in much research on contemporary identities (e.g., Back, 1996; Baumann, 1996; Gillespie, 1995). From the age of 12 children become increasingly reflective about broad social categories, such as community, culture and nation (Piaget, 1968; Emler and Reicher, 1995). Due to the changing pressures relating to identity for this age group, they are often keen to discuss who they are, how others expect them to be, and how they resist social pressures to conform. These pressures can sometimes trigger “identity-consciousness” as the teenager becomes aware of her conflicting individual and cultural identities (Erikson, 1968).

For these reasons the study included seven friendship groups of adolescents between 12 – 16 years, 5 with girls and 2 with boysⁱⁱⁱ. In total, there were 44 participants in the focus groups as a whole who attended one of Brixton’s three secondary schools. The discussions lasted between 50 and 80 minutes, and were all conducted on school premises. Within each group, I ensured that there were a range of nationalities, skin-colours^{iv}, and addresses in Brixton, as is summarised in table I. In the discussion most students spontaneously described themselves with reference to where they lived, their skin-colour and ethnic heritage. When they did not, I would ask them to clarify these points. In terms of skin-colour most children would spontaneously describe themselves as ‘white’, ‘black’, ‘brown’, or ‘white and black’. (W&B in the table and pie chart refers to ‘white and black’.) This shows what a salient issue skin-colour is in their daily lives.

Table I about here (Focus groups)

Ethnicity was also something that, in general, I did not have to ask participants to clarify. Questions of nationality and Britishness would arise naturally in the focus group discussion. The second pie chart shows the percentages of different ethnicities in the study. The label 'African' includes teenagers who called themselves as Nigerian, Ghanaian or African. 'AC' refers to those who called themselves Afro-Caribbean and Jamaican. Children who called themselves 'mixed', I have labelled 'mix'. These include students who described themselves in these terms: British-American, British-Nigerian, English-African, Jamaican-British, and Jamaican-English. British includes those who called themselves British, English or Welsh. The 'others' are Bengali, Muslim-Asian, Portuguese, and Vietnamese.

Pie chart 1 about here (skin-colour)

Pie chart 2 about here (ethnicity)

In the analysis of qualitative data many social researchers use the highly successful code-and-retrieve system of data control (Richards and Richards, 1983). This allows the researcher to code all material as it is collected and develop hierarchical 'trees' from the emerging patterns of common themes and related ideas. It also enables the constant re-coding and re-structuring of the analysis as the relationships are better understood and indexing themes become more distinct. In keeping the research centred on the research aims, themes that regulate to the central questions must be explored in depth both during the group and in the course of analysis. Thematic analysis is a systematic method for categorising and consolidating research findings which facilitates explanation and theorisation. Following Knodel (1993), Krueger (1997), and Morgan (1993) I developed a thematic coding frame on the basis of the criteria in table II.

[Table II about here]

The analysis used systematic steps of identifying and examining key themes, followed by comparing results with those of other groups in order to establish patterns. This established the validity and consistency of findings. A secondary researcher who assessed the consistency of my approach moderated the entire process. Because I have used these procedures, I am confident that what is presented below is an accurate reflection of the participants' views.

The qualitative analysis computer programme *Nud*ist* was extremely useful in making sense of the complexity within and between these themes. *Nud*ist* stands for "non-numerical, unstructured data indexing, searching and theorising" (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd, 1997, p. 2). There are two main advantages to *Nud*ist*. First, it offers the capacity to deal with a huge quantity of interrelated themes with a precision and a degree of flexibility to which the human brain can only aspire. Second, it enables theoretical links to be made, tested and developed in the actual process of coding the data. This makes grounded theory, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe, both more possible and more precise (Richards and Richards, 1983). One can move from an examination of findings to the examination of theory and so systematically assess the adequacy of the latter against the former, as we do here.

2. Identities in Brixton: The Findings

All those in this study live in the general vicinity of Brixton. As there are no clear boundaries that one can find on a map to determine whether an address falls into the Brixton area or not Brixton's borders are symbolic rather than material. Identifying

with Brixton is more of a social psychological dilemma than a matter to be decided by geography.

What has emerged in this present study is that people in Brixton develop an understanding of the area where they live and of their relationship to it through the eyes of others. For children in Brixton seeing oneself as others see you can be a painful experience. Representations of Brixton in wider society tend to marginalise and denigrate many from Brixton. Brixton is generally characterised as black, foreign and criminal. These representations often conflict with the more positive image that many Brixtonites have of themselves. For them Brixton is a vibrant community, which is proud of its “creative energy, cultural richness, interests and concerns” (<http://www.brixton.co.uk>). Realising the divergence between insiders’ and outsiders’ representations on Brixton can threaten both the self-knowledge and the self-esteem of people who live there.

Many teenagers described how people “look down on you” (Dean), and how this made them “feel sick” (Dee). This has many consequences for those in Brixton - in terms of making friends, joining sports teams, being stared at in the street, experiences within local shops, employment opportunities and relations with the police, for example. One serious outcome of contradictions between the experience of living in Brixton and others’ representations of Brixton is the *spoiling* of identities. One boy who lives in central Brixton, for example, asserts that many people in the area “hate themselves” (Theo). Others describe how outsiders’ representations make them feel guilty and undervalued. All teenagers know that there are negative representations of Brixton, as these girls explain to Caroline, the moderator:

Caroline: If somebody said ‘oh right You’re from Brixton’, how would you feel?

Louise: They just put a stamp on you already, saying 'oh, she's bad'.

Caroline: So what does this stamp say?

Danielle: She's scum, she's dumb.

Given the negative reputation that Brixton has in wider society, it is not surprising that only a proportion of children living in the area positively identify with Brixton. Out of the 44 teenagers in the study 19 teenagers (43%) explained that they were not-from-Brixton, but lived in areas bordering Brixton, such as Clapham, Stockwell and Streatham. They still spoke with authority about Brixton, but they positioned themselves as neighbouring observers. They used their knowledge of Brixton to assert their experiences in the area as only visitors and shoppers from nearby places. Even though many of these children live in what their teachers consider to be Brixton, they are careful to assert that they are *not*-from-Brixton.

If one were to examine this on any dimension of identity relevant to these teenagers, such as gender, skin-colour, address in Brixton, age and school, for instance, one would certainly find differences. Rather than list all the possible identities that affect how teenagers relate to Brixton, however, is it not possible to develop an account that takes the multiplicity of identity for granted? For the teenagers in my study, at least, it is not a matter of different identities being 'switched on' at different times, as Turner *et al* (1987) suggested. Different aspects of identity intertwine and define each other. The experience of being a young black man living in the centre of Brixton cannot be equated to the identities of youth + blackness + masculinity + from-Brixton. These different aspects of identity merge, reinforce and conflict. To highlight the multiplicity and inter-subjectivity of identities in general, let us look at the complexity of one particular aspect of identity in Brixton – being black.

While black people are not the largest group in Brixton (consisting of less than 50% of Lambeth's population, London Research Centre 1997-98), the representation of Brixton as black is very pervasive. Hence, black teenagers are the most likely to be associated with Brixton. This is because their skin marks them as being-from-Brixton in the eyes of the outsider. As Tajfel (1969) pointed out, "the learning and assimilation of socially sanctioned value judgements is made even easier through the existence of obvious visual cues which place each relevant individual firmly and instantly in the category to which he belongs" (p. 88). Skin-colour is a "cognitive short-cut" in classifying who belongs in Brixton and who does not (Operario and Fiske, 1998, p. 43). The question is - what are the consequences of being seen to 'belong' in Brixton?

For some living in the area of Brixton is a double-burden, a double dose of stigma. In Goffman's (1968) terminology, they are already "discredited" as black; they are potentially "discreditable" as Brixtonites. Black teenagers, more so than those of other skin-colours, need to defend themselves against "the socially sanctioned value judgements" (Tajfel, 1969) that link aggression, masculinity, animality, and blackness (Hall, 1997), particularly in the context of Brixton (Gbadamosi, 1994). These representations centre more on young black men than on black women (Sewell, 1997). Hence, it can come as no surprise to learn that it is black boys in this study who have the most difficulty in rejecting such stigma and asserting a positive sense of self.

Some black teenagers attempt to protect themselves against the stigma of being-from-Brixton by symbolically removing themselves from Brixton. One of the strategies for coping with threatened identities is to adopt stigmatising representations of Brixton, claim they are 'true', but create a distance between Brixton and themselves. However,

as some of those who adopt this strategy live in the vicinity of Brixton, this is difficult and risky. It is imperative that they emphasise that people in Brixton “are not like us” (Tom).

Tom: It's the kind of area, and kind of people that live there, they are not like us. They are kind of poor some of them.

Jack: They feel like they have to have an attitude

Tom: They think like they can go out stealing in shops, cos 'I'm poor and I'm going to rob you, yeah!'

Theo: If they are brought up with that attitude, yeah, they will do it. They don't have money to do nothing now. All you need to do is walking through the crowds, and just nick from their pockets, something like that. Pickpockets.

Often it was the older black boys who maintained prejudiced descriptions of Brixton in this way. It was not exclusively so, however. Amongst the white, Asian and black girls in the study there was evidence that all cultural and skin-colour groups would sometimes use this strategy in establishing and defending a positive social identity. In stark contrast, some teenagers, especially black girls, are often very proud of living in Brixton. Take this example from a black, mixed heritage fourteen year-old girl:

Chantelle: If I wasn't living in Brixton, if I was just living in a black area, I think I'd be different. I'd just be all black, all black. I wouldn't know how to speak to white people. Don't think that I would be friends with them or anything. But I'm glad that my mum brought me here. I'm glad that I live in Brixton because I mix with everyone.

When asked where they were from, over half the children, 25 out of 44, said “Brixton” (a total of 57%). These teenagers use representations of Brixton as a resource which with to construct alternative, more self-affirming representations that bolster a positive social identity. Brixton is remembered as a site of resistance and black political agency in wider discourses, even celebrated in the lyrics of Eddie Grant and Paul Simon. Its strong black community, which has established a political identity as explicitly anti-racist, and encourages awareness of black history and culture. By

identifying with an area known for its resistance to oppression, some teenagers, often black girls, develop the self-awareness and the self-confidence to oppose racist images of black people. But not all black teenagers succeed in this. Take this exchange between 12 and 13 year old girls:

Sam: Brixton is PONG! It smells, especially round Iceland, the market and that, the meat -

Louise: - the raw fish and that.

Pauline: And the people in Brixton are very aggressive, right. So, say you are walking in the market, which is packed especially in Brixton, you are walking in the market and someone bumps into you? It is better if you just turn around and walk away, cos if you say something he's going to cause havoc!

Danielle: BUT (*loudly*) the thing about Brixton is that everyone sort of talks and mingles with each other, because like we are all the same kind of culture and everything like that!

The first three girls establish a barrier between themselves and negative representations by, ironically, endorsing these representations but asserting difference between themselves and 'people in Brixton'. These girls are black and mixed heritage. Danielle, a black girl of the same age and from the same school as the first three, has a different approach. She is aware that these representations may damage the community and threaten Brixtonites' self-esteem. At different points in the focus group she tries to undermine the others' denigrating portrayal of Brixton. After these girls in the focus group told several stories about mad or criminal people in the area, Danielle passionately asserted:

Danielle: Everyone here, right, not one person has said something - good! Everyone is going around 'riots', this on the bus, that on the bus, that on the bus, that is what I am trying to say, that's how talk comes out about Brixton. And everyone here, right, has said something bad about Brixton, and made Brixton worse, and so you can't go on like you are all good people, like you are supporting Brixton, cos you are not. You're there telling the lady, that hasn't been to Brixton, yeah, all this about Brixton. Imagine what she is gonna think now!

This quote illustrates that Danielle is aware of the power of representations. She knows that these stories do more than simply describe Brixton. They construct Brixton in the mind of the outsider; they “make Brixton worse” and so maintain Brixton’s status as marginal and subordinate to wider society. Teenagers such as Danielle have the skill and the representational resources to contest stigma and to demand Brixton be recognised as a tolerant and vibrant community. This does far more than create a pleasant picture of their neighbourhood: through positively identifying with Brixton such teenagers achieve self-confidence and self-respect.

Why is it that Danielle is able to assert a positive version of where she lives and, hence, who she is, and not the other girls in the group? Why are there such diverse patterns in how black teenagers in the study identify with Brixton? From this detailed case study it would seem that the family and the school can have an enormous impact on teenagers’ developing identities. Children learn how to evaluate their claimed communities from dominant discourses. When they are associated with groups and communities that are often marginalised in the wider society, it is essential they develop alternative representations in order to challenge such stigma. Their family and their school are important sources of this social and psychological support. Indeed, one school in this present study stood out in creating a supportive environment where students could reflect on, challenge and reject denigrating representations of the area. Students from this school were significantly more adept in challenging stigma, explaining it and developing an identity of which they could be proud.

What these findings show us is that real-life identities such as these cannot be easily compartmentalised and explained. Skin-colour, gender, age, school and address

interrelate to create a complex mosaic of Brixtonite identities. Brixton is not unique in this. In the diasporic times we live in, identities are increasingly contested and dynamic for all of us. As scientists of the social world, how well can we explain the intricacies of late modern identities? Do our social psychological theories penetrate and explain the complexities of contemporary stigmatised identities?

3. Using Social Psychology to Explain Patterns in Identification

Social identity and self-categorisation theorists have demonstrated that negative representations of one's social group can result in lowered self-esteem as "people simply lack the confidence and cognitive ability to engage in self-favouring discrimination" (Abrams and Hogg, 1990, p. 41). Some teenagers in this study, for example, struggled to reject stigmatising representations of their neighbourhood, and through self-stereotyping, endorsed negative self-images.

Social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorisation theory (SCT) have also established that there are different ways of coping with and challenging negative representations in the quest for positive social identities and high self-esteem (Turner *et al*, 1987). These are strategies of (a) social mobility, which rest on the belief that group boundaries are permeable, and (b) social change. The latter may involve social competition (e.g. 'race' riots), intragroup comparisons (e.g. white working-class racism), selecting a new comparison group (religion, as opposed to say, ethnicity) and the re-evaluation of the group (e.g. Black is beautiful).

In rejecting the stigmatising representations that others have of Brixton, children in this study use all of these strategies. Firstly, there is social mobility. This is when those stigmatised are "motivated either to leave that group physically or dissociate

themselves from it psychologically" (Turner, 1982, p.34). Obviously, the easiest way of removing oneself from association with negative representations of Brixton is to leave the area. For many young people this is simply not an option. As we have already seen, some children instead psychologically remove themselves from Brixton in asserting that they are '*not-from-Brixton*' and different to those living there. This extract illustrates the difficulty some children have in admitting association with Brixton. Significantly, no one in this focus group identified positively with Brixton.

Caroline: Would you say that you come from Brixton?

Theo: No.

Tom: I don't know.

Theo: I go there normally every day, cos I work near there, and I stay with my uncle as well. So I stay there all the time.

Caroline: But you don't live there?

Winston: You don't *live there!*

Theo: (*Quietly*) I live there with my uncle in the shop.

The second of Turner's strategies for dealing with negative representations of your social group(s) is that of social change. What Turner described as 'social competition' has occurred in Brixton's past: there have been three so-labelled 'riots' (in 1981, 1983 and 1995). These developed from anger over community-police relations. For many in Brixton, the police are prejudiced in their treatment of black people and/or people from Brixton. One dual-heritage girl exclaimed "I know that there are some racist policemen" (Aimee), who "harass them for no reason" Katrina added. Some saw the riots as the "community response" to the police "labelling all black people as criminals" (Danielle). In this way they could be seen as an attempt to a) challenge how they are seen and so b) re-define identity.

Intragroup comparisons were evident in some of the children asserting that at least they didn't come from "the baddest" places in Brixton, such as "the Front Line" or "Devil Town" (referring to Angel Town which is a ward in the Brixton area). Sometimes, they did select a different comparison group by suggesting that other areas are "worse" than Brixton (Tom). One of the school-heads explained this:

School-Head 2: "There is a huge pecking order. And so some of them think 'oh there's Brixton, and there's Peckham' below it you know. So you have your big pecking order about where everybody lives."

Turner's final strategy of social change, re-evaluation of the group, relates to what others have called 'social representations' (e.g., Farr, 1987; Jovchelovitch, 1996; Moscovici, 1988). In taking on the representations that others have of their group(s), and challenging these representations, adolescents re-evaluate representations of Brixton. In this way, they turn stigma into positive versions of where they live and who they are. The elaboration and rejection of particular representations is, therefore, a crucial part of the co-construction of positive social identities. Identities in Brixton illustrate this particularly well, as there is a clear divergence between insiders 'and outsiders' representations of the area. In the quest to establish and maintain positive social identities we have seen how different adolescents in this study draw on representations of Brixton in different ways. Simply put, they either reject or affirm outsiders' stigmatising representations of their neighbourhood.

Social representations theorists (Duveen and Lloyd, 1986; de Rosa, 1987; Jodelet, 1991) have examined the intricate relationship between identity and representation. For a child to come to terms with his world, they have explained, he needs to grasp hold of, relate to, and manipulate the way in which this world is represented by others and by self. In this way the child takes on the 'presentation' of the world as she finds it, relates it to past experience and understanding, and so re-presents it to herself. Through the

continuous and complicated processes of relating others to self and self to others, the familiar to the unfamiliar, the novel to the accustomed, the child builds up a stock of social representations.

Social representations provide the 'scaffolding' for the child's efforts to construct a social identity world. "Yet, the circulation of representations around the child does not lead to them being either simply impressed upon the child, or simply appropriated by the child, rather, their acquisition is an outcome of development" (Duveen, 1994). As the child familiarises himself with the dominant representations around him, and comes to re-interpret, to re-construct, and so to re-present, the 'scaffolding' is dismantled. When the child has established a position for herself within the networks of meanings that comprise her culture, through processes of reciprocal relatedness and decentring, she can be said to have negotiated an identity, though this identity is always inherently unstable.

To relate this back to Brixton, we can see that there may be patterns to the intersection of identity and representation, in terms of the common experience of being associated with Brixton, but there are always variations in how these experiences are interpreted. Daily encounters in Brixton are pervaded with representations of many salient categories - gender, ethnicity, skin-colour, age, address and Brixton itself, amongst others. Because of differences in positioning, past encounters, significant others, salient discourses, group membership, social support and psychological resources, each child may experience these representations differently. Hence the perspective of social representations allows us to address the dialectical nature of these identities.

Incorporating social representations into SIT and SCT has considerable rewards. It is possible to see how the different perspectives can be related. Take this explanation of the motivational aspect of self-categorisation by Abrams and Hogg (1990, p. 31):

We are driven to represent the context dependent social world, including self, in terms of categories which are most accessible to our cognitive apparatus and which best fit relevant, i.e., subjectively important, useful, meaningful, similarities and differences in the stimulus domain.

From the perspective of social representations, such 'categories' are social representations which, too, must be 'accessible to our cognitive apparatus' and must be 'subjectively important'. The bridge here is the recognition that such categories or representations stem from both the social world and the subjectivity of the individual. However, there are differences in how far these approaches address both sides of this dialectic.

As much research within SIT and SCT has been restricted by experimental procedures, the lived realities of the dialectic of identity have been simplified. The central character in these theories is "an individual striving to achieve a satisfactory concept or image of himself" (Tajfel, 1978, p.61). The focus remains at the level of the individual because they fail to integrate the *social* aspects of the content and the *social* aspects of the process of identification (Wetherell, 1996b; Duveen, 2001).

Hence the problem lies in too narrow a focus. The picture is of each and every individual constructing an identity on his own, choosing where to position himself, cut off from the influence of and pressure from others. Just as a child learns to differentiate between different geometric shapes by trying to post them through differently shaped holes, we can picture individuals trying to find an appropriate

social niche for themselves. Social reality is presented as a given, not a construction. The social construction of groups (Wetherell and Potter, 1992), the distinction between reference and membership group (Hyman and Singer, 1968), the discriminatory and stigmatising effects of categorisation (Breakwell, 1986) and the relations of domination and subordination that rest on social divisions (Foster & Louw-Potgieter, 1991) are under-theorised. Tajfel (1969) himself removed these issues from the field of identity research in saying:

The content of categories to which people are assigned by virtue of their social identity is generated over a long period of time within a culture; the origin and development of these ideas are a problem for the social historian rather than for the psychologist. (p.86).

Eliminating culture from identity construction eliminates the social from our psychology. This disconnects our theories from the social world that we seek to understand. One is left with a picture of individuals making alliances with particular groups and forming identities in isolation from the shared meanings and symbolic values that these groups embody, impose on others and subvert. SCT has narrowed this focus further through its emphasis on how we categorise ourselves, and its relative inattention to how others categorise us.

Categorisation is more restrictive than a matter of an individual voluntarily choosing particular groups with whom to identify. Categorisation may, in fact, be imposed on one. Teenagers in Brixton, particularly black boys, we have seen, are often associated with negative representations of blackness, criminality and aggression. Without adequate social and psychological support some of these teenagers endorse such stigma and so struggle to assert a positive version of self. To explore these identities, therefore, we need to address the role of social representations in the construction of identity. This helps explain the *restrictions* on identity construction.

Identities as negotiated, fluid, and contextual are very much in vogue. The multiple, contested and situated nature of identities (Wetherell, 1996a) demonstrated by those in my study supports this fashion. In current academic discussions, an emphasis on the non-negotiable or “imperative” aspects of identity (e.g. Duveen, 2001) are likely to provoke accusations of essentialism (Fuss, 1990). To many contemporary social theorists, criticism can hardly be more damning. Nevertheless, as I hope I have shown, there are limits to how far we can opt in and out of identities. However one makes sense one’s sexed body or the colour of one’s skin, our identities have to incorporate, negotiate and/or contest representations of gender and skin-colour. The gaze of the other makes these identities unavoidable. In some senses, therefore, identities are imposed onto us. “We are not left to define ourselves as we see fit” Ryan recognises (1999, p. 146).

Turner’s cognitive account of the social identity of the group does not, I believe, fully explain how it is that “identification is often a matter of imposition and resistance” (Jenkins, 1996, p.73). By concentrating on *self*-categorisation, rather than the dialectic between the categorisation of self both by other and by self, both SIT and SCT provide partial and somewhat individualistic accounts of the construction of identity.

Conclusion

I would not want to suggest, however, that SIT and SCT are not useful in explaining modern identities.^v I hope I have shown that they provide a clear account of some of the aspects of identity construction, particularly for the purposes of research on threatened identities. However, identities are *continually* being negotiated and

challenged at an inter-subjective level (Crossley, 1996). This is not a special case for the socially stigmatised in our society. Identities are continually developed and contested through others' representations of our claimed social groups. While this becomes clear in research in a stigmatised community, identities are always constructed through and against representations. An account that does not incorporate representations into the account of identity construction, does not, therefore, deal with the complexities of real-life identities.

The theory of social representations can easily remedy the individualism of other theories of identity, as I have shown. In exploring how representations are manipulated in the re-evaluation of the group, we can see how identity construction must build on and develop representations of relevant social groups. As Hall (1991) has said "the notion that identity has to do with people that look the same, feel the same, call themselves the same, is nonsense. As a process, as a narrative, as a discourse, it is always from the position of Other" (p.49). To theorise social identity, therefore, we need to highlight the dialectic between how we see ourselves and how others see us. In studying identity, therefore, what we must ask is '*Identity in whose eyes?*'

The examination of identity should begin with the dynamics between "how we have been represented and how that bears on how we represent ourselves" (Hall & Du Gay, 1996, p.4). Thus identification and re-presentation can be seen as different sides of the same coin. They are the delicately intertwined processes of one's collaborative struggle to understand, and so construct, the world and one's position within it. If social psychology is to engage with the changing nature of identities in today's world, the role of representations in the co-construction of identities must be addressed.

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ⁱ As there are few social statistics of Brixton's population *per se*, those from the general area of Lambeth are helpful in revealing something of the social economy of Brixton.

ⁱⁱ First names refer to the research participants, though all names have changed to protect participants' anonymity. The participants chose many of these names.

ⁱⁱⁱ This proportion reflects the gender imbalance in Brixton's school population. Because of the recent closure of two all-boys schools and the high number of excluded boys from existing co-educational schools girls greatly outnumber boys.

^{iv} Some researchers in multicultural communities label participants on the basis of ethnicity (Baumann, 1991), nationality (Brah, 1996), or 'race' (Tizard and Phoenix, 1993). The labels black, white and brown sometimes cause an anxious concern for political correctness. The vast majority of participants in this study showed no such anxiety and used the terms positively. As this research demonstrates the importance of appearance and gaze in Brixton, it becomes apparent that in this context at least ethnic and racial labels are often pseudonyms for colour. Skin-colour, not ethnicity or heritage, is often the mark of difference.

^v I admit that my account presents SIT and SCT as somewhat uniform without changes of emphasis over time. Clearly, this is somewhat unfair. In Tajfel's early work (e.g. 1978) and in that of Sherif's (e.g. 1962), for example, who was a profound influence on Tajfel, the dialectics of intergroup relations and the role of power were presented as crucial to understanding the development of identity. In addition, recent developments in self-categorisation have attempted to rectify limitations; an example being Vescio *et al* (1999) who offer an extension that recognises multiple group membership. However, these theories, as they are generally known today, are none-the-less guilty of over-playing the agency of the self and underplaying the role of representations in the co-construction of identity.