Stereotyping and its consequence for racial minority youth

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ABSTRACT

With reference to media reports and studies of racial minority youth in areas of justice and education, this paper explores how stereotyping/racial profiling, as an aspect of racialization, structures the experiences of racial minority youth. The resulting differential treatment limits the youth's opportunities and often operates to their detriment.

In 'completely clearing' a young Black man of a drug charge recently, an Ontario Superior Court judge, Molloy, ruled that the two Toronto police officers had no reasonable grounds for stopping the accused in the first place. The judge wrote that the officers singled out the accused and decided to search his car "because he was a Black male driving an expensive Mercedes" (*The Globe and Mail,* September 17, 2004, p. A1). This was yet another case in which an Ontario judge concluded that race played a role in the police action toward the accused. In 2003, in a case involving an 18 year old Black male, the Ontario Court of Appeal ruled that when sentencing a defendant, it is appropriate for courts to take into account the role that systemic racism might have played in the defendant's action. Judge Rosenberg noted, "Systemic racism and the background factors faced by black youths in Toronto are important matters" (*The Globe and Mail,* February 13, 2003, p. A1). In citing the relationship of individuals' actions and systemic racism, as exemplified through racial profiling/stereotyping, these judges underscore the fact that racism is not merely a case in which police officers independently come to perceive Black young men as likely trouble-makers and law breakers hence the need for them to be targeted by the police (James, 1998; Wortley & Tanner, 2004); but that these perceptions are informed by a system of policies and corresponding practices which are to be found within institutions. In other words, racism is not simply a reflection of individuals' negative attitudes toward racial minority members of society (i.e. individual racism), but also a reflection of how the policies, regulations, programs, values, norms, sanctions and practices of institutions within society inform and structure individuals' attitudes and practices towards those considered subordinate or inferior (i.e. systemic racism).

For racial minority members, this subordination is evident in differential treatment as a result of racial profiling (or stereotyping). The Ontario Human Rights Commission (2003, p. 6) defines racial profiling as

> any action undertaken for reasons of safety, security, or public protection that relies on stereotypes about race, colour, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, or place of origin rather than on reasonable suspicion, to single out an individual for greater scrutiny or different treatment. The Commission has noted that profiling can occur because of a combination of the above factors and that age and/or gender can influence the experience of profiling.

In this paper, I explore how stereotyping or racial profiling informs, structures, limits and motivates racial minority youth in their educational, social and cultural pursuits. I reference my experience as an educator and educational researcher, to show how stereotyping operates to limit the performances, opportunities and achievements of racial minority youth. I examine how they use their understanding of the limits that stereotyping places on them to navigate and confront the structures in order to ensure participation in school and society in terms that address their interests, location and aspirations. Finally, I discuss the concept of stereotyping and minority youth's experiences with stereotyping in the judicial system and schools.

Stereotyping and Canada's multicultural discourse

For this discussion, stereotypes are taken to mean simplistic and uncritical judgements of people based on such characteristics as gender, age, race, ethnicity and skin colour ascribing to them attributes learnt early in life from society (Paul, 1998). As such, there is a tendency to believe in the 'correctness' or 'truth' of the judgements with disregard for evidence to the contrary. Stereotypes not only serve to categorize, organize and simplify the amount of complex information that we

receive, they also operate to essentialize people – attributing sameness to them, as well as evaluating and generalizing about them as a group.

In Canada, stereotyping is practised in a context informed by a multicultural discourse that tends to mask the fact that race, ethnicity, language, accent, religion and other demographic factors are used to ascribe particular cultural practices to various members of society. Such practices are not viewed as stereotyping, but as a reflection of the principles of multiculturalism at work. But as critics point out, multicultural discourses contribute to the ways in which "ethnic Other Canadians" (those who are not British or French) are categorized and homogenized with likeness or sameness based on identifiable characteristics, "foreign" heritages, and static cultural values and practices (James, in press). In such a context, stereotyping, rooted as it is in the hegemonic ideology and discourses of racism, is likely to find support as it operates at the individual and structural levels in the racialization of individuals. In some cases, racialization takes the form of what some people consider to be "positive" stereotypes. What is wrong, they might ask, with the stereotype of, for example, an ethno-racial group as good scholars, or as good athletes? Pon (2000) points out that the seductive nature of such "positive stereotypes" has the effect of masking the racism and structural inequalities that exist in society, and as such "is often quite harmful."

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Racial profiling/stereotyping and the judicial system

Let us return to the case of stereotyping or racial profiling in the policing of people of colour. The above examples demonstrate that courts (at least some judges) accept that racial profiling goes on among police officers. Nevertheless, some people argue that the attitudes and actions of police officers are not based on race, but on police officers' skills, training, knowledge and experiences whereby they are able to "recognize" and "know" potential criminals and lawbreakers. But the fact that the targets of police gaze and surveillance tend to be people of colour and in many cases Blacks, is, to some extent, evidence of racial profiling (James, 1998; Wortley & Tanner, 2004), for as Comack (1999) indicates, not even the law and by extension its enforcers are "impartial, neutral, and objective" (p. 56).

When I studied the experiences of Black youth's encounters with police on the streets – where they were frequently under suspicion, or perceived as "up to no good" – a number of respondents, particularly males, reported that they were often stopped, questioned, searched and harassed by police and security officers; and they were often perceived to be working class, immigrants and/or refugees. They said that it was not their clothes or hairstyles that contributed to this treatment by police; rather, as one respondent put it, "It's your colour, your colour, and it's your colour" (James, 1998, p. 166).

Schooling, stereotyping and the limits to educational opportunities

Studies of the experiences of marginalized students – i.e. immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities – within the Ontario school system and Toronto in particular, indicate that students find the school system oppressive, specifically with regard to stereotyping by educators (Dei et al, 1997). Consequently, students' interactions in schools reflect their recognition of, and resistance to, the oppressive ethos of the system. With this in mind, I talked with a group of six new teachers to explore their experiences with high school students in downtown Toronto (James, 2002, p. 12-14).

These teachers reported that students in the racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse "inner city" schools in which they taught, were often described by educators or labelled as at risk, low achievers, learning disabled, drop-outs, disruptive, trouble-makers, problem-students, rebellious, and individuals who are likely to get into illegal activities. Students were also described as coming from "working poor" families who "*lived in government housing*." Some students were thought to be "*growing up in immigrant, blue collar and/or single-parent households on special assistance*." In a few cases, the schools that the students attended were located in what were described as white and middle class neighbourhoods, with tree-lined streets and expensive homes. This contributed to schools policing the students to protect the neighbourhood. The act of policing involved police officers, security guards, hall monitors and teachers patrolling the school and its grounds. One reading of educators' practices in these schools is that they were more concerned with the reputation of the schools and about being safe and free of gangs and drugs. In this regard, disruptive students were disciplined and managed, not merely to protect teachers and students from physical harm, but to protect students from the social influence of those labelled as potential law-breakers.

The oppressive school contexts elicited a number of paradoxical responses from students who, while to an extent conforming, simultaneously resisted the hegemonic discourses which academically, socially and culturally constructed them as, among other things, low achievers and trouble-makers. In conforming, they continued to be registered as students but would attend school and classes as they wished, and if interested in the course material, would participate in classes and complete assignments. At the same time, they demonstrated their resistance by their high rate of absenteeism, lateness, talking (including gestures), walking out of classes whenever they chose, and congregating in particular areas of the school. Many students also conformed by wearing their uniforms (if uniforms were involved), but in communicating their resistance to the oppressive school space, would engage in practices such as wearing jewellery, caps and bandanas, decorate their

school uniforms with accessories, and congregate in defiance of the rules.

Clearly, these marginalized students negotiated the tension-ridden space of schools and classrooms, conscious of the power relationships between themselves, their teachers, administrators and other dominant peer group members. In this regard, they actively used the real and imagined spaces of schools and classrooms to resist, confront, antagonize and contest the school authorities and their constructed labels or images, hence making these spaces self-validating, relevant, safe, different, unifying and empowering. The irony here is that teachers used the actions of these students to support their stereotyping. And given the ways in which zero tolerance is practised, these actions become the basis for suspensions and/or expulsions from schools; rather than the starting point for understanding and addressing the students' needs, concerns and interests.

The limitations and absurdity of "positive" stereotypes

In discussing his experience with the "model minority" stereotype, Pon writes that during high school his English teachers often queried whether or not he had done his essay assignments himself; and despite his assuring them that it was his work, they seemed unconvinced. Nevertheless, because of his teachers' continuing suspicions, he never received grades higher than an A-. He continues:

> "It took me years beyond high school to figure out that my essay-writing skills, which were strong for my grade level, raptured the dominant stereotypes of Chinese students, particularly the belief that we are all math whizzes. Stereotyping particular groups such as Chinese places limits on what is expected of them and inhibits an understanding of the complex differences among the members of the group. Thus, the stereotypes my English teachers held of Chinese people resulted in an expectation that I was supposed to be good at math, not English" (Pon, 2000, p. 224).

In the case of Black youth, athletics is perceived to be a positive force in their lives: keeping them in school, learning needed skills, and as a mechanism for upward social mobility. The accompanying view about the athletic abilities, talent and skills of Blacks are supported by coaches and educators, as well as by media images of successful Black student athletes (James, in press). Kai James (2000, p.54) writes, "Gym teachers are perhaps the most overt in their interpretations of the stereotypes. I remember the track coach coming into my grade nine class and asking all the Black students if they would be participating in the track meet." And drawing attention to the different ways in which students were treated by teachers, James, who was about six feet then, goes on to write that "I was recruited by a coach who had no knowledge of my athletic ability or my interests. At the same time, an Asian friend was being encouraged by the math department to write the math contests." In another instance involving a tall Black student who was a friend, he added: "On the first day of school his social studies teacher, a complete stranger to the student greeted him [saying]: 'I hope you are not one of those basketball players that's gonna show up for class once a week, because if you do you can just leave right now.'"

The experiences of athletically stereotyped Black students indicate that while there is little evidence to support the claims of their innate superior athletic abilities and skills, the stereotypes persist. Educators continue to encourage them toward sports, thinking that in doing so they are supporting them in their schooling; but in fact, they are failing to equally support them in their academic interests and aspirations. In some cases, not only do Black students come to believe or internalize the stereotypes, they give priorities to their athletic roles at the expense of their academic performance and educational achievements.

Conclusion

Stereotyping is a major issue that young people confront. The evidence indicates that because of stereotyping, assumptions and expectations are made of individuals sometimes resulting in false charges, differential treatment, and conflicts. Stereotyping influences the ways in which young people are dealt with by authority figures and adults in general. In a context of racism, stereotyping/racial profiling and discrimination thrive and limit the opportunities and possibilities of young racial minority people. It is incumbent on our institutions to pay attention to the conditions – the policies, practices, programs and individuals carrying out these policies – which perpetuate stereotyping, and in so doing build conditions that facilitate respect and appreciation for the human rights of our young minority people.

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