

***“So, you’re from Brixton?”***  
**Towards a Social Psychology of Community**

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For my mother

who taught me to question

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## ON A PERSONAL NOTE

A researcher's personal history guides their professional development as much as their theories, their academic cultures and funding opportunities. Many children in this study were aware of this and asked about my own life history. Thus I have become particularly aware that the questions that this research raises are also questions about my own life.

As a white child of an expatriate family, I have an ambivalent cultural identity. Issues of how others see me, where others think I 'belong', and my attachment to this culture pervade my life. The societies in which I grew up were marked with racism, stigma and conflicting social representations of different social groups. Living in colour-divided countries such as Papua New Guinea and South Africa, in particular, taught me not only about the damaging consequences of stigma, but also of strength and resilience in the face of stigma.

Growing up with other children of different ethnicities, colours and religions taught me about other perspectives: how to understand them, how to learn from them, how to challenge them. Through these relationships with others, I experienced the creativity and mutual appreciation that is born from the recognition of difference. I would say that such experiences are enormously valuable, both in personal and academic terms.

I believe that I can relate to the community of my research, as I have known children deeply affected by a similar conflict in representations, in both positive and negative ways. Many children suffer from this experience, while others benefit from it. My personal concern with the well-being of the young in any community has guided my academic study of this particular community. To pretend that I can speak for a community is naïve and dangerous. What I can do is speak about a community, and reveal my interest therein.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the social psychological significance of 'community', as it is experienced and talked about in Brixton, a culturally diverse area in South London. There are two points of entry into the social psychology of a community: (1) the negotiation of social representations of the community and (2) the co-construction of community identities. The theoretical perspective that I have developed through this research is grounded in the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1984, 1988; Farr, 1987) and draws on other theories of representation (Hall, 1997a), community (Cohen, 1995), identity and self-consciousness (Hall, 1991a; Tajfel, 1982; Mead, 1934), stigma (Goffman, 1968) and the media (Thompson, 1995). It is an ethnographic study which combines ongoing participant-observation, 7 focus groups with 44 adolescents aged between 12 and 16, 5 in-depth interviews with deputy-heads of Brixton's schools, a media analysis of a documentary set in Brixton, and follow-up discussions. These accounts are woven together to answer the principal research question: how is 'community' lived in Brixton? This study shows that communities emerge as sites of struggle in the negotiation of self-identity, belonging and difference. Community identities are constructed through and against social representations of the community, particularly those in the media. Two competing representations of Brixton - 'Brixton as Diverse' and 'Brixton as Bad' - were found in the same representational field. The data illustrate the different ways in which people affirm, manipulate and contest these ambivalent social representations in order to defend their perspective on Brixton, and so either claim or reject community membership. I examine how these representations both reflect and construct the social reality of Brixton. This reveals the potential of social representations to construct, delimit and empower the living of community. The systematic analysis of social representations of community and community identities demonstrates the pressing need for a social psychology of community.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Defining the Problem

### 1. Studying Community

### 2. The Research Question

### 3. From the Particular to the Universal

### 4. Structuring the Research; Structuring the Thesis

Part I: Researching Community      Part II: Community in Context

### 5. Mixing Theory, Method and Analysis

In this short introduction I broach the question of a social psychology of community and explain how I have attempted to tackle this complex issue. This lays the framework of the thesis. In briefly presenting the importance of studying ‘community’ I introduce the research question. In considering the different aspects to this, I describe the context of my study: Brixton. This leads on to a discussion of the particular and universal dialectics of research which structure my thesis. In mapping out the different chapters that follow I explain the interconnections between theory, method and analysis which are highlighted throughout the text. The aim of this chapter is to introduce the central questions of my research, map out my attempts to address these questions, and so prepare the reader for the unfolding thesis.

## 1. Studying Community: Studying Psychology within Society

Communities integrate individuals into society. Communities connect personal histories, individual loyalties and private attachments, as well as embody cultural practices, shared meanings and common values. Communities, thus, can be seen as the bond between the individual and society. This is the domain of social psychology: what makes social psychology distinct from its sister disciplines, psychology, sociology and anthropology, is its focus on the dialectic between sociological and psychological phenomena (Moscovici, 1972). As sociology and anthropology, social psychology studies societies, social movements, cultural practices, collective beliefs and social attitudes. As psychology, it examines the mind, individual abilities and attitudes, the ideas, values and emotions of individuals, and the development of self-consciousness. As Brown (1965) has pointed out, however, social psychology should not be considered as a grand synthesis of psychological and sociological knowledge.

Social psychology is a discipline in its own right as its focus is on the interaction between the psychological and the sociological.<sup>1</sup> “From the very beginning”, Jaspars (1983) describes, “social psychology has regarded it as its task to integrate the knowledge of the individual and of society” (p.278). Social psychologists are interested in the conflict between the individual and society (Moscovici, 1984), the tensions and attractions, the bridges and the barriers between individuals and the outside world. Community is a stage on which much of this drama occurs. It is where individuals “learn and continue to practice to be social” (Cohen, 1995, p.15). Community provides the tools for building shared knowledge, common practices and collective identities, while allowing for differences, individuality and agency. As such, one could be forgiven for assuming that community is a well-researched and theorised concept within social psychology. Sadly this is not the case.

I believe that it is essential that we do address the question of community. Despite the merging and fragmenting of community boundaries in the late modern world (Cohen, 1995), it is still a central issue in our everyday lives (Crow and Allan, 1994). Not only do we need to understand the significance of community in contemporary society:

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<sup>1</sup> Though, as Farr (1990) has rigorously researched, there really are *two* forms of social psychology: sociological social psychology and psychological social psychology.

more specifically, I believe, we need a rigorously social psychological theory of community. I suggest that the theory of social representations supplies social psychologists with the theoretical tools and methodological insights to begin this task, as Jodelet (1991) has already demonstrated. This perspective, first proposed by Moscovici in 1961 and extensively developed over the last four decades (as is documented at a web site dedicated to research in the field of social representations: <http://socpsych.jk.uni-linz.ac.at/SocReps/SRNet.html>), guides my own exploration into the social psychology of community. This research illustrates the value of the theory of social representations both in emphasising the social construction of community and in explaining how community identities emerge from the negotiation of social representations of the community. This highlights the status of ‘community’ as a social creation that has acquired reality.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of community presents the social researcher with an interesting paradox: it is a salient part of our everyday lives, and yet, its existence is highly contested. We can all agree on the importance of community, but not on its significance. We can all discuss the communities to which we belong, and yet be unable to map out where they begin and end. We can be sure that we are different to ‘other’ communities but, when pushed, have to admit that we share commonalities. Thus, community is at once taken-for-granted and highly debated. It is this paradox that I seek to address. Not only is my thesis an example of what a social psychological account of community might look like; I believe that it also demonstrates the very need for a social psychology of community.

## 2. The Research Question

My research examines the symbolic construction of community within one particular area in South London: Brixton. I do not propose or defend a theory of community. I provide an account examining what meaning ‘community’ has in the everyday experiences of people in Brixton. What emerges in this study is that communities are (a) given meaning through different social representations of that area and (b) lived through the negotiation of identities. Social representations of Brixton both confirm

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the thesis I stress the socially constructed nature of ‘community’. For the most part, I would ask readers to bear this in mind. When it is essential that my constructive approach be emphasised I have used parentheses to remind readers that there is no agreed objectivity to ‘community’, and what meanings we give it are negotiated, contested, and altered as we make it significant in our everyday lives.

and contest the identities of people who live there. They provide people with a way of making sense of this urban area, and a way of establishing a relationship with it. Through social representations of the places in which they live, I show in this thesis, people assert and defend their identities both as members of a community and as different from others living around them.

Brixton is a fascinating place to study representation and identity. 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 significance of identity and social representation in the everyday activity of making sense of community. In particular, the struggle over representations comes to the fore. In the wider society, Brixton is often represented as a community divided and disadvantaged by cultural difference. Media images of Brixton, for example, portray the area as rough, threatening, aggressive and black. In recognising these negative representations, in developing them, or in contesting them, people who live in Brixton establish distinct community identities. Whether they manage to reject these representations and assert a more positive version of Brixton, or whether they use such representations to denigrate Brixton and their relationship to it, their identities are born in a struggle against stigma. Stigma does not confuse the relationships between representations of a community and community identities: it clarifies them.

This is my focus: how Brixton is lived through the negotiation of identity and social representation. Studying the social psychology of community in a *stigmatised* area amplifies the dialectics between identity and social representation that exist in the social construction of *all* communities. As such, the theoretical perspective which I develop in this account of a very particular community could contribute towards a more general social psychology of community.

### 3. From the Particular to the Universal

Brixton is one area, and a relatively small area at that, which illustrates the transformation of communities and identities around the globe in our local-global age. To universalise from one distinct area may seem somewhat ambitious and over-generalistic to say the least. I am aware that extreme caution should be exercised when

relating the particular to the universal, as many other theorists have warned (e.g. Billig, 1996). However, while bearing this in mind, there are, I believe, at least two reasons for doing so. First, there are the realities of Brixton: its heterogeneous nature, the simultaneous desire for, and threat of, difference within Brixton, and the stigma imposed on the area through external discourses. There can be little doubt that these realities are experienced by social groups everywhere, as they are the conditions of our age (Brah, 1996). Second, Brixton symbolises the fusion of universal and particular. National images and traditions merge on a daily basis with representations and practices of the area, neighbourhood and family. The dazzling array of food products from all over the world within the local context of Brixton market, is a good example of this. The market has been described as a “site of more fluid exchanges between cultures” (Gbadamosi, 1994, p.34). “Each person must find their own position on entering such a market and is, to some extent, free to make choices concerning their own experiences and identity” (*ibid*, p.42). The market symbolises what Giddens (1991) has called “the separation of time and space” (p.16), and the individual struggling to assert a distinct identity in a community of difference. The diasporic identities within Brixton are at once local and global. Like many contemporary identities, they are “networks of transnational identifications encompassing ‘imagined’ and encountered communities” (Brah, 1996, p.196). To understand what people call “the Brixton community”, one has to place it in its universal setting, physically and historically, to grasp its relationship to countries, cultures and histories.

Marková (1982) has explained that “a universal is real only insofar as it realises itself in a particular that is characteristic of an individual thing” (p.120). To discover the universal we need to examine the particular. Thus, a theory of community can only emerge from a study of the particularities of other socially defined communities. Understanding the particular will uncover its antithesis: the universal. The local can only be appreciated when it is put in the context of the global (Back, 1996). The story of Brixton that is presented in this thesis cannot be transposed onto other communities, as the particular is unique. However, it is a story which does enable us to develop a grounded theory of the symbolic construction of community.

#### 4. Structuring the Research; Structuring the Thesis

One can talk about a community as it is lived. One can also talk about a community as it is perceived. These are two perspectives on community. In everyday life, we know that there are these different ways of thinking about any social object, and we manage the divergence that may appear between different perspectives. In social psychology we talk about the divergent perspectives of actor and of observer (Jones and Nisbett, 1972), or perceiver and other (Heider, 1958). In ethnography we distinguish between participants and observers (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). The divergence between perspectives, and our ability to use both perspectives, sometimes simultaneously, has received less attention.

To study community one must examine divergent perspectives. Insiders, participants and actors can tell us what it is like to live in or near a community. Outsiders and observers can tell us how it is different to where they are from and how they perceive it from a distance. Only in relation to each other, however, do these perspectives become meaningful. What is crucial in my research is the study of the divergence between how Brixton is lived and how Brixton is represented by, and to, others. For those stigmatised in particular, this space between perspectives is where the real significance of identity and representation is felt.

An appreciation of the importance of perspectives pervades this research. It has guided choices of theory, method, analysis and the very structure of the thesis itself. The thesis is divided into three parts. Part I, Researching Community, deals with the theoretical and methodological debates which guide the investigation. Part II, Community in Context, focuses on different perspectives on Brixton: insiders, outsiders and those in-between. The conclusion brings the two parts together, and suggests how this particular case can contribute to a social psychological theory of community.

##### Part I: Researching Community

Chapter Two, *Theorising Community*, establishes the theoretical basis of the project. After considering the absence of a coherent social psychology of community, I ascertain the value of establishing such a social psychology. The theory of social representations is then reviewed in the light of how it can access the question of community. Chapter

Three, *Accessing the Community*, lays open my developing relationship with the community. It reveals how the project began, how the theory of social representations guided my ethnographic approach and discusses the value of difference between the researched and researcher. Chapter Four, *Identity in Whose Eyes?*, focuses on the dialectics of identity within the context of community. Presentations of the main social psychological theories of social identity and self-consciousness are illustrated and critically assessed, by drawing on the stories and experiences of those who live in the Brixton area. Chapter Five, *Analysing Divergent Perspectives*, explains how the significance of the divergence in perspectives on Brixton came to the fore in the process of analysis. A detailed explication of my analysis exposes how the different identities of children in Brixton are both supported and challenged by the dominant social representations of Brixton.

## Part II: Community in Context

Part I has firmly established the importance of examining the perspectives of insiders, outsiders and those in-between; this is what Part II seeks to achieve. Chapter Six, *Making Sense of Brixton's Diversity*, examines a dominant social representation of Brixton - Brixton as a diverse community - used by those who live in the Brixton area. How social representations are used to promote different versions of community, to denigrate otherness, and to challenge stigma in asserting identity is highlighted with vivid narratives from both children and adults. Chapter Seven, *Brixton is Bad – Representation and Reality?*, considers how outsiders' perceptions of Brixton impact the social construction of Brixton. The importance of the visual nature of representations of Brixton is investigated in a study of images from a documentary about Brixton. Finally, Chapter Eight, *The Struggle for Recognition and Esteem*, brings the perspectives of the two previous chapters together in analysing stories of encounters between insiders and outsiders. What we are concerned with here, are the consequences of divergence in perspectives, particularly for negotiating self-confidence and self-worth in interaction with others.

## 5. Mixing Theory, Method and Analysis

Part I, *Researching Community*, provides the bones of my thesis: the theoretical structure. What follows, Part II, *Community in Context*, is the flesh, so to speak. The



chapters on my findings in Brixton illustrate the theoretical ideas which I developed in the preceding chapters. This is not to say that my theory of community emerged prior to, or separate from, my work in the field. It is a grounded theory, in the Glaser and Strauss (1967) sense of that term. From four years of work in Brixton, from interviewing, conducting focus groups, media analysis, observation and participation, my understanding of the complex interrelationships between representation, identity, stigma and community, has been challenged, developed and strengthened. Researching in the field has orientated my reading and enabled me to survey the literature on community with a critical eye, grasping what relates to narratives from Brixton and so testing and refining my own understanding of the social psychological importance of community. The material presented in Part II has informed my understanding of the very necessity, significance and consequences of community.

The theories which have informed this study, primarily social representations, social identity theories, Mead's account of self-consciousness, Goffman's account of stigma, and Hall's broad ranging work on representation, identity and the media, have guided my selection of methods, mainly participant-observation, focus groups, interviews and media analyses. Together theory and method have orientated my analysis of the findings, which, in turn, led back to refining theoretical and methodological assumptions. The dependency between theory, method and analysis ensures a continual re-evaluation of all three components of the thesis. For example, Chapter Four, *Identity in Whose Eyes?*, began as a theoretical account of social psychological theories of identity. However, as I began to develop my own understanding of the negotiation of identities in Brixton, I was then able to reconsider this work critically. Hence, voices from Brixton infiltrate all chapters in illustrating, problematising and developing a social psychological account of community. The unavoidable linear structure of a thesis unfortunately masks the interdependency of the different chapters. I hope that my integration of theory, method and analysis throughout the thesis emphasises the grounded nature of this research.

### Conclusion

Finally, the concluding chapter attempts to use the concrete example of Brixton to establish the key questions for a social psychology of community. It is my hope that this thesis, as a whole, presents more than a detailed study of a particular community.

Through the analysis of representations and identities in the context of Brixton, I hope to have highlighted the social psychological necessity, significance and consequences of community. Hence, I tentatively offer my thesis as a stepping stone to a social psychology of community.

# PART I: RESEARCHING THE COMMUNITY

## Introduction

The aim of Part I is to develop a sound theoretical and methodological framework from which to analyse a particular example of the social construction of community. I begin this project with a paradox: communities are a taken-for-granted part of our social experiences and yet academic discourses on 'community' are often contest its very existence. In this thesis I argue that is a real need to understand how community is made meaningful in everyday discourse. Once we have considered how community impinges on our understanding of each other and on our understanding of ourselves, we can reconsider how we can meaningfully discuss a social psychology of community. I start with the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1984) to orient my investigation into how communities are lived. Once the theoretical basis of the thesis is presented, in Chapter Two, *Theorising Community*, I can reveal the practicalities of this research. That is, I introduce the reader to the research field - Brixton, and explain the methodological principles that guide my choice of methods, selection of participants and my developing understanding of my topic, in Chapter Three, *Accessing Community*. Before I can explain how I analysed this material, I have had to review the main social psychological theories that guided this analysis. Here, in Chapter Four, *Identity in Whose Eyes?*, I have drawn on the experiences of the research participants to illustrate and critique Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982) and self-categorisation theories (Turner *et al*, 1987). This done, I can explore the process of analysis and reveal how the importance of divergent perspectives emerged in the coding and detailed examination of data, in Chapter Five, *Analysing Divergent Perspectives*. Together, these four chapters provide the reader with the tools to assess the presentation of the study itself, in Part II. My theoretical perspective, my choices of methods and my skills in analysis are revealed to establish the framework that I have developed to explore the social psychology of community.

## CHAPTER 2

### Theorising Community

#### 1. Theories of Community

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- 1.2. Social psychology: the absence of community
- 1.3. Is community still a relevant concept today?
- 1.4. Other theories of community

#### 2. Why a *Social Psychology* of Community?

- 2.1. Changing paradigms
- 2.2. What is a community?
- 2.3. Communities of difference
- 2.4. Perspectives on community

#### 3. The Media and the Social Construction of Communities

- 3.1. The media construct on-line communities
- 3.2. The media construct off-line communities
- 3.3. Brixton: The media construct community and identity
- 3.4. Media representations as stigma

#### 4. The Theory of Social Representations

- 4.1. What are social representations?
- 4.2. From collective to social
- 4.3. Social re-presentation and social representations
- 4.4. The contradictory nature of social representations
- 4.5. Social re-presentation as a socio-cognitive process

#### 5. Using Social Representations to theorise Community

- 5.1. Performing community
- 5.2. Identifying with the community
- 5.3. Stigmatising the community
- 5.4. Asserting community

This chapter establishes the theoretical basis of the thesis: the theory of social representations as a tool for theorising community. After reviewing community psychology and other fields concerned with the issue of community (particularly with regard to the role of the media in the social construction of a community), I make a case for a distinctly social psychological approach to community. A short account of the history of our discipline demonstrates that need for a paradigmatic shift and for the theory of social representations to study community adequately. The chapter concludes with a detailed account of how this theory can provide the basis of a social psychology of community.

## 1. Theories of Community

The knowledge that this thesis is centred on issues of community, may not, by itself, disclose to the reader from which academic discipline it has emerged. There is a vast literature on community that is associated with many disciplines: principally sociology, anthropology, media studies, cultural studies, political thought, history, theology, literature and philosophy. The enormity of the field is conveyed in Nisbet's (1967) impressively concise review of key European texts on community which contains references to Hegel, Comte, Weber, William Morris, Hobbes, Rousseau, Jeremy Bentham, Disraeli, Burke, Marx, Durkheim, Voltaire, and Simmel. Despite, or perhaps because of, the extensiveness of material on 'the community' there seems to be little agreement on what community actually means. There is indeed a "bewildering variety of meanings associated with the term 'community'" (Crow and Allan, 1994, p.1). After reviewing 94 definitions of community, Hillery (1955), for example, concluded that "there is no complete agreement as to the nature of community" (p.119). More than forty years on, the different meanings of community are no less ambiguous.

Meanings of community are the focus of my research. I am not so foolish as to imagine that I can provide an uncontested theory of community where these impressive theorists have not wholly succeeded. My ambition is rather different. I seek to examine the meanings of community in everyday life, that is, the symbolic construction of community. How important is community in our day-to-day lives? Do we think about it? Do different meanings of the same community co-exist? If so, what are the consequences of competing versions of the same community?

The significance of community in everyday life is a problem for social psychology and its sister disciplines, anthropology and sociology. My particular interest, identities and social representations in and of a stigmatised community, focuses attention on the dialectics of community: insider-outsider, self-other, similarity-difference, and desire-threat. As such, it is a study of the social psychology of community. The reasons for this will become clear as the study unfolds.

### 1.1. Community psychology: the absence of community

It may seem sensible that a social psychology of community begin with an examination of community psychology. The social psychologist embarking on a study of community would probably assume that journals and texts from community psychology would provide essential background information on their object of study. Book titles from community psychology may excite their interest and send them rushing round libraries, perhaps looking for *Community Psychology* (Orford, 1992), *Introduction to Community Psychology* (Rappaport, 1977), or *Community Psychology: Values, Research and Action* (Heller, 1984). For the most part, I would imagine, the social psychologist would be disappointed with these texts.

This is not criticism of these particular books: they all provide interesting and informative studies of applied psychology in a community setting. Their concern, however, is not primarily with the social psychology of community. Rather, community psychology “is about understanding people within their social worlds and using this understanding to improve people’s well-being” (Orford, 1992, p.3). The social psychologist inquiring into the negotiated and contested meanings of community in everyday life will soon realise that “the majority of community psychologists do appear to be united by a general concern for how individuals function within and between such systems or environments as schools, hospitals, criminal justice facilities, mental health centres, the workplace, and the family” (Lounsbury *et al*, 1985, p.40). *Community per se*, what it is, how we think about it, is rarely a topic of interest.

A content analysis of community psychology by Lounsbury *et al* (1985) confirms this. Their list of the most common topics published includes:

- therapy
- clinical diagnosis, assessment or judgement
- crisis intervention
- clients’ reactions to mental health centres
- intervention in an institutional setting

Their analysis covered articles in the *American Journal of Community Psychology* and *Journal of Community Psychology* from 1973 – 1982 (Lounsbury *et al*, 1985, p.50). My own review of the *British Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* confirms that things are much the same ten years on in Britain. The ‘special issue’ topics convey the applied nature of much of this research. For example, these are some recent special issue topics:

- Social Dimensions of AIDS
- Work Stressors in Health Care and Social Service Settings
- Social Inequalities and Mental Health
- Bullying in Adult Life
- Psychosocial Aspects of Infertility and the New Reproductive Technologies

As Smail (1994) has stated the “really positive achievement of community psychology is ... to provide an analysis of our psychological ills in terms of the environmental influences that bear down upon people and the extent of people’s powers to modify such influences” (p.5). As such, community psychology has not, to date, provided an inroad into the social psychology of the community. My point is not that these issues are not of import to the social psychologist: clearly they are. My point is that the social psychologist interested in the *social psychology* of community will find little in this literature that is of direct relevance. In fact, many may be “dismayed at the extent to which research in community psychology still focuses upon the individual” (Orford, 1992, p.12). Community, itself, provides the context of community psychology, not the focus.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.2. Social psychology: the absence of community

Social psychology itself provides little more assistance to her student investigating community. The answer as to why social psychology has yet to theorise community adequately lies in its history. Farr’s accounts of the history of social psychology

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<sup>1</sup> A colleague at the London School of Economics working in a community development project in Peru has suggested that the failure to address the social psychological significance of community may explain failures in the history of community development and community psychology projects (Ramella and Attride-Stirling, forthcoming).

describe what Graumann has called “the individualisation of the social” (1986; see Farr, 1978, 1991a, 1996). Ever since F. H. Allport (1924) defined “psychology in all its branches” as “a science of the individual” (p.4), investigation in social psychology has shifted to the lone individual.<sup>2</sup> A consequence of this has been the editing out of sociological forms of social psychology, such as Mead’s social behaviourism, Blumer’s symbolic interactionism, Thomas and Znaniecki’s social attitudes and Ichheiser’s study of interpersonal relations (Farr, 1996). It is not surprising, then, that such an individualistic psychology has not, and indeed, in this form, cannot, engage in studies of community.

A history of social psychology reveals how the paradigmatic roots of social psychology, which run back to Descartes, have restricted the study of the social or the intersubjective. Farr (1987) has described how psychology was born in the context of Cartesian dualisms of mind/body, self/other, and individual/society. Descartes’ glorification of the I and his conviction that “the I that is the starting point of knowledge and certainty” (Marková, 1982, p.16) have diminished the scope of the discipline. Here mind is conceived as separate not only from body, but also from its material and social world. Within this paradigm it is difficult to grasp the essentially social nature of mind and of self. Dewey pointed this out a century ago, in 1899, in saying that social psychology ignored the context of culture and ideology and their effects on interactions (quoted in Hilgard, 1977). Morris (1996) has made a similar point: “Beginning from the assumption of the existence and reality of the individual, who then, and only then, forges links between herself and other separate and discrete individuals, it becomes all but impossible to conceive of any sort of community at all” (p.226).

The study of an asocial self, or a de-contextualised individual, has characterised science carried out within this paradigm and is based, in part, on the early Enlightenment’s search for universal laws of a ‘pure’ human nature (Purkhardt, 1993). Social bonds are severed in this analysis in the quest to uncover a pure physics of the mind and self

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<sup>2</sup> There are exceptions. Venerable examples of psychological studies, which bridge the individual and social, are Le Bon’s (1896) work on the influences of collectivities on individual cognition and Rivers’ (1926) work on the effect of culture on perception.



(Moscovici, 1972). Cartesian social psychology has plucked the very subject of social psychology, the social self, from her inter-relations within a society of others, uncoupled the inter-dependent dialectics of self, and so reified an isolated, detached and thus incomplete self. As such, social psychology has paid “little attention to the study of the environment, its culture, and its institutions” (Himmelweit, 1990, p.18). This has led to the study of the asocial individual without history or culture: the dislocated individual without the comfort and the challenge of living in a community of others. Our Cartesian legacy has resulted in a social psychology without the networks of ‘others’ to which we sometimes belong - communities, nations, cultures. And thus, at present, we have a social psychology struggling to contribute to an understanding of the practical realities of the world in which we live: bloody clashes of community identities and the celebrations of community diversity unfolding around the globe.

### 1.3. Is ‘community’ still a relevant concept today?

Community, one might assume, is an outdated notion; something that fits better in more traditional, more stable, and more collectivist societies (Puddifoot, 1995). Cultural, political and geographical changes in the modern world have increased the salience of individualism, and thus many agree that “there is no longer any such thing as society” (Thatcher, quoted in Raban, 1989). Or, as Disraeli stated much earlier: “Modern society acknowledges no neighbour” (quoted in Nisbet, 1967, p.52). As we become more and more immune to the bloodshed of community conflicts, the very concept of community seems less and less significant to the changing demography of the modern world (Cooke, 1989). Nancy (1991), for example, asserts that the “gravest and the most painful testimony of the modern world, which possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer, ... is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, to the conflagration of community” (p.1). Considering this, is it not a bit late in the day, and a bit irrelevant, for social psychologists to develop a theory of community?

Many community theorists have indeed proclaimed the ‘eclipse’ or ‘end’ of community (e.g. Stein, 1972). They have argued that “the spread of the mass media, the growth of centralised state power and the seemingly inexorable tendency to urbanisation have eradicated meaningful distinctions within societies except those marked by economic

status and, in particular, by relation to the capital market” (Cohen, 1995, p.76). Urbanisation, migration, globalisation, new medias and technologies have dissolved the significance of place in the late modern world, and so too threaten the physical geography of community (Meyrowitz, 1986). Crow and Allan (1994) have found that “in modern society it is rare for the boundaries of place to coincide neatly with the sense of community which people hold” (p.xvi). Because of the supposed “territorial basis” of community (Suttles, 1972, p.234), some theorists have suggested that community, too, is “lost” (e.g. Stein, 1972; Nisbet, 1967). Also the assumed correlation between ‘rural’ and ‘communal’ has meant that communities are often represented as face-to-face, traditional and conservative. Urban areas are seen to be more modern, more civilised, and more complex (e.g. Park, 1925). Thus increased urbanisation has led many to assume that contemporary society is less communal. Instead social theorists have described the increasingly plural and divided nature of society “on a culturally hybrid globe” (Werbner and Modood, 1997, p.4).

However, I suggest, communities, for these very same reasons, are as, if not more, important today. As Abrams (1978) has stated, “the paradox of community is the coexistence of a body of theory which constantly predicts the collapse of community and a body of empirical studies which finds community alive and well” (p.12). Crow and Allan (1994) are also of this opinion: they state that “despite the repeated pronouncements of its inevitable decline in the modern world, community life is still very much a part of our social existence” (p.xxi). Their book, entitled *Community Life*, is testimony to the “diversity, persistence and creativity” of community (*ibid*). Communities not only provide the tools for shared understanding, shared history and culture, but communities enable the very emergence of a communal self in the first place. Communities today may be under threat, this is obvious. But this gives them more, not less, significance in our understanding of others, of our own societies, and, crucially, of our selves (Morley and Robins, 1995). Indeed, Bauman has depicted late modernity as “the age of the community”: “of the lust for community, the search for community, the invention of community, imagining community” (Bauman, 1991, p.246). In fact, there is no escaping community as the “demands on us to (re)create

community are incessant and ubiquitous” (Morris, 1996, p.223). As Cohen (1995) has described:

It is empirically undeniable that the 1970s and 1980s have seen in the Western world a massive upsurge in sub-national militancies founded on ethnic and local communities. The aggressive assertion of locality and ethnicity *against* the homogenising logic of the national and international political economics has marked the renaissance of community. (p.76).

As we approach the next millennium these issues have become even more pressing. Hence the study of community is not only valuable because it can help to redress the individualistic balance within social psychology; it is valuable because it is an urgent issue of our times.

#### 1.4. Other theories of community?

The study of community is a new field for social psychology (for interesting recent studies see Jodelet, 1991; Moodie *et al*, 1997; Puddifoot, 1995). It is not, though, new for the social sciences. It is a well-trodden and extensively researched area for sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and philosophers. Some of the literature from philosophy and political theory provides a cautionary tale for the social psychologist. Here, the naturalness or ‘ideal’ of community is highlighted (Tinder, 1980; Kamenka, 1982), often as a critique of individualism and the supposedly divisive nature of modernity (e.g. Bellah, 1985). A common assumption in political and philosophical writings on community, more or less explicit, is often that community is an essential human good. Mary Rousseau (1991), for instance, has claimed:

The range of community, its practicality, its relation to religion, to praxis, to law, to social organisation, to morality all find explanations that make sense in light of the central premise of altruistic love as the tie that binds. (p.xiii).

The social psychologist attempting to discover the everyday meanings given to community must recognise the normative dimension of community in academic discourses, and also the danger of such. “The vagueness of the term is overlaid with positive resonances about its social desirability” (Crow and Allan, 1994, p.192). Community, Baumann (1996) also has observed, is almost invariably seen as positive. The ‘reality’ of communities, the concrete experience of living within a particular community, may, however, be far from positive. Romanticising the community

obscures the difficulties of community living, the exclusionary nature of community and the experience of stigma as a consequence of community affiliations.

Sociologists and anthropologists, by contrast, are more concerned with the description of community life in different settings. Nisbet (1967) has asserted that “the most fundamental and far-reaching of sociology’s unit ideas is community” (p.47). Having been the source of many social psychological theories of the social construction of knowledge, social psychologists often draw on these sister disciplines, particularly from Berger and Luckmann (1967), as well as Durkheim (1898), Goffman (1971), Geertz (1973) and Levy-Bruhl (1926). Many sociological and anthropological studies of the community can be of enormous value to the social psychologist investigating community. Insights from social anthropologists Cohen (1989, 1995) and Baumann (1996), and sociologists Back (1996) and Crow and Allen (1994), for example, have benefited my own work, as will become apparent to the reader.

## 2. Why a *Social Psychology of Community*?

If other social scientists have produced insightful texts on community, is there really a need for a social psychology of community? I would strongly argue that, yes, indeed there is such a need. It is precisely the question of how communities become meaningful for the individual that is especially our place to answer. Our concern must be how one of the key concerns of psychology, the social self, creates, defends and challenges representations of community: how it is that, in and through representations of communities, we create both a common identity and a located self.

There are many questions that a study of community throws up for the social psychologist. For example:

- How do we make sense of communities in everyday life?
- Do social identities relate to communities?
- How do different representations of the same community develop?
- What are the consequences of a divergence in perspectives on community?
- What are the consequences of living in a stigmatised community?

Such questions are precisely the questions that social psychologists in particular are trained to address. The cross-roads between intersubjectivity and subjectivity, between the public and the private, between the 'we' and the 'I', are, or at least, should be, the very heart of a rigorously *social* psychology. How we develop and maintain roots that connect us intimately with others, and yet, through these very roots, also develop difference and uniqueness, is pivotal both to the study of social psychology and to the study of community. As such, I suggest, not only should social psychologists be interested in community - as a marked feature of our social worlds, social psychologists should be at the forefront of community research.

### 2.1. Changing paradigms

First, however, we need to develop the necessary tools for the analysis of community. Social psychological theories rooted within a Cartesian paradigm, which uproot the individual from the social, cannot adequately theorise community (Moscovici, 1998). Instead we need theories grounded in a competing paradigm, which, in contrast, highlights the dialectics between self and society. We need, that is, to turn to Hegelian logic (Marková, 1982). Hegel's conception of dialectics allowed that contradictions are sublated or re-united in a synthesis that involves a process of qualitative transformation. This means that it is necessary to think of self/other and individual/community as contradictory units working towards transcendence, rather than as oppositions. This framework allows for a relational or 'genetic' social psychology (Moscovici, 1972), better able to tackle the complexities presented by contemporary societies. Individual thought and social reality need to be understood as mutually interdependent, mutually constitutive and mutually transformative. Phenomena must be investigated in all their complexity in order to maintain the integrity of the system as a whole. Mead's ideas are illustrative of this form of understanding (Mead, 1934, 1964, 1972). Here the individual is a product of her social environment, and she, in interaction with others, (re)produces that environment in constantly changing and dynamic ways. The perspective of social representations, located within a Hegelian paradigm, enables the unveiling of the contradictory aspects of communities: universality and particularity, equality and difference, appeal and threat.

A thorough examination of the underlying philosophy of our science, of the foundations on which we build our theories, allows us to re-conceptualise the connection between community and community-membership, and so generate a radically social account of the psychology of community. Thus, I propose, by locating both ourselves and our theories within a Hegelian paradigm, we can develop and refine tools for a comprehensively *social* psychology of community.

## 2.2. What is a community?

My use of the term ‘community’ refers to the way communities are talked about, constructed, and defended by those who reside in them and come into contact with them. I do not pretend that a ‘real’ or ‘natural’ essence of community can be so discovered. I am interested in how representations, practices and relations of power both construct and restrict the social construction of communities and the consequences thereof.

There are many ways of conceptualising communities. From the sociological and anthropological literature on community it is possible to distinguish four principal components of community:

1. Common experience (e.g. the Dunblane community)
2. Shared knowledge (e.g. a monastic community)
3. Common identity (e.g. the Bradford community)
4. Physical boundaries (e.g. the Shetland community)

Most communities incorporate all of these things. Communities must share both experience and knowledge - without such a basis there is no possibility of communication or of co-operation. The fact of being located within a community, the fact of belonging, of common experience and the necessity of sharing knowledge, constructs identity (Heller, 1984). “There is no doubt”, as Crow and Allan (1994) have noted, “that the communities of which we are members play a significant role in shaping our social identities and patterns of action” (p.1). Even place, as a space which is socially constructed by those within it, and also as the context within which many social groups emerge, is common to most communities.

Many communities clearly are located in a physical place, which has a material reality (e.g. the Tooting community, the Harlem community). What a geographical area means to us, how we experience it, how we live it, is primarily understood through the collectively constructed representations which we give to these spaces. Obviously I am not suggesting that the physical world is of minor importance. I am arguing that it is 'there' and always 'there' as the stage on, and through, which we act. But our only access to this objective world, and the only way we can penetrate it, is through intersubjectively agreed meanings. I can only be sure that I live on a housing estate when I have established that it is a housing estate for you, too, and that we share a similar understanding of the label 'housing estate'. Through shared meanings, therefore, the material reality of place is constructed, developed and contested.

In Chapter Six, *Making Sense of Brixton's Diversity*, there are examples of the social construction of places in Brixton. One of the most interesting is the market: different people represent the market in different ways in negotiation of different identities. For Crow and Allan (1994) "it is clear that while community is often associated with place, it is by no means the case that all communities are territorial communities" (p.xvi). Communities which do not share the same physical territories may still construct, collectively, an understanding and an experience of 'place'. The use of particular spaces for particular activities may unite dispersed groups (e.g. cyber cafes and locker rooms). Communities are held together by shared experiences, shared knowledge, the collective construction of space, and common identities. And what links experience, knowledge, place and identity, I argue below, are social representations.

### 2.3. Communities of difference

"All community is a matter of degree" (Maciver, 1917). To talk about 'a' community to which one belongs is simplistic. As soon as one seeks to describe a community, its diverse and plural nature immediately becomes apparent. We are all members of several communities simultaneously - these sometimes clash (as the horrors of ex-Yugoslavia illustrate), sometimes merge (e.g. the mestizo in Mexico) and sometimes merely co-exist (e.g. the diverse yet quite separate ethnic groups in Fiji - Fijian, Fijian-Indian, white-local, Chinese, Australian and British).

“Community is as much about difference as it is about similarity and identity” (Gilroy, 1987, p.235). For example, ‘Irish’ may be an identity that unites a community, but it is only one. There are other identities intersecting with this: religion, generation, location, family, class, occupation, education, gender, and lifestyle, amongst others. These bonds of commonality and difference bind and divide groups and individuals in intricate ways at different times. They may help to unite a community in particular ways (as Europeans, for example), or split the community into different groups (Catholic and Protestant, for example), or blur boundaries between those from the community and outsiders to the community (fans of the Irish pop idol Bono, for example).

Brixton, itself, provides many examples of the merging and clashing of “communities within communities”, as a teacher from Brixton described it. From outside the community, from the perspective of the observer, of the researcher, and the other, ‘Brixton’ appears as a unified physical and cultural space. People talking about Brixton draw on representations of the community, that give ‘Brixton’ - the word, the place, the community, - meaning, coherence, and consequence.

From within Brixton, what makes it a community, what ties it together as a public space, is often less clear. What often hits the first-time visitor to Brixton is the diversity, the mix and clash of cultures, and the mix of class, of belief, of dress, of ethnicity, of colour, of food. As one of the children in the study put it - 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” (Frances<sup>3</sup>). If anything the most distinctive feature of Brixton is its polymerism, its multiplicity, its kaleidoscopic character.

Hence it can be difficult to attain a sense of ‘what Brixton is about’, what unites it, what ties the multiple identities, histories and aspirations together. Because of this, it is easy for the visitor to form the view that Brixton is not ‘really’ a community. It is too diverse,

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<sup>3</sup> First names refer to the research participants. Their names have been changed to protect their anonymity. Appendix I contains a table of all adolescents included in the study. This gives information on age, address, affiliation to Brixton, group dynamics, ethnicity, skin-colour, gender, participation in focus group, and school.



too fragmented, too colourful to be 'a' community. Brixton appears to consist of heterogeneous groups with diverse social aspirations and interests. From this perspective the term 'the Brixton community' may seem "to straight-jacket" the experience and understanding of the many (Brah, 1996, p.100): it can seem an un-informed imposition from the outside. One based on the desire to establish and maintain difference where, perhaps, there is none.

I have been aware of the dangers of reifying community throughout this research. In the early stages, the diverse and fragmented nature of identities within Brixton initially made me doubt the existence of a coherent Brixtonite identity.<sup>4</sup> The lack of geographical maps of Brixton or social statistics explicitly about Brixton suggested that Brixton, as a clearly defined area, simply does not exist. Maps and censuses from the area either refer to Lambeth, a defined political and geographical region extending beyond what is generally thought of as Brixton, or to Brixton's main wards (Angel, Ferndale and Town Hall). Brixton, itself, does not appear as a distinct unit.

This does not, of course, mean that it is not a community. What this thesis illustrates is that a community exists symbolically, as a social construction that has real practical effects on people's lives. Brixton's borders are symbolic, rather than material, and hence more negotiable and more contested than would otherwise be the case. The focus groups and participant observational research demonstrated the salience of Brixton as a basis both for identity construction and for the social construction of community. I discovered that there is a very strong Brixtonite identity, of which some people are very proud. For others the label 'Brixton' is a handicap, something to deny, to be ashamed of: it is a stigma. Brixton is chiefly characterised by an acceptance of, and desire/fear of, difference and diversity. "The thing about Brixton", one of the girls in the study informed me, "is that it is different" (Vicky). Difference, and respect for difference, are, paradoxically, what people in Brixton share.

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<sup>4</sup> Children in the study used this term, "Brixtonite", as a way of claiming the identity of an insider in Brixton. Some literature on Brixton uses the term 'Brixtonians' for the same purpose. In loyalty to those in my study, I shall use their term 'Brixtonite' to refer to all those who identify with the area.

#### 2.4. Perspectives on community

As members of communities come together and negotiate a common understanding of their social worlds, they form an identity as a community. As Cohen (1995) has described, “people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and a repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity” (p.118). This identity emerges through the recognition of difference. Differences, and the threat and instability that they create, may actually strengthen community identifications as they challenge our need to belong, and our needs to establish and to maintain bonds with others (Calhoun, 1980). We can see, then, that a community is something that is performed by insiders, as people create internal representations, a local culture and a common social reality (Silverstone, 1999a). Community is something we *do*, not only something that *is* (Baumann, 1996). Through the processes of identification, of communication, and of constructing shared knowledge and understanding, a collective ‘we’, a community, emerges. Thus community generates a “sense of belonging”, of social relationship, of inclusion (Calhoun, 1980, p.109). Through the internal representations that community members co-construct, a community identity emerges, transforms and is contested.

Just as we locate ourselves in particular communities, we also organise others into other communities. In this way, we exclude others from our own communities. Communities thus work to include and exclude simultaneously. When we label others in terms of particular communities, we typify and evaluate them accordingly. Different communities have different meanings, and different values. Thus being labelled ‘of community x’ has certain consequences, depending on how dominant discourses reify ‘community x’. Some communities are represented in quite negative ways and, generally, these external representations are not endorsed by its members. When this occurs, we can say that the community is *stigmatised*. Just as Goffman (1968) described in relation to social identities, communities can be spoiled by the negative representations that others hold of them. Thus external representations, often found in the media, may marginalise and stigmatise not only the community, but also community members.

Having said that, it would be too simplistic to suppose that internal and external representations of particular communities were really so distinct. There are differences in how representations are used in the construction of identity and difference, but there are not simply two sets of representations operating independently. Different people use the same social representation in different ways to build common ties with others or to establish difference from others in the maintenance of identity. The social construction of identity and difference, therefore, go hand-in-hand. The boundary of a community is where these representations meet. Where internal representations and external representations clash, is where the socially constructed reality of a community emerges. It is where symbolic currencies change. As Cohen (1995) has described:

The most striking feature of the symbolic construction of community and its boundaries is its oppositional character. The boundaries are *relational* rather than absolute; that is, they mark the community *in relation* to other communities. (p.58, italics in original)

Hence, a rigorous analysis of community must take a relational or dialectical approach. Representations of the community must be examined from both sides of the community boundaries. Ortner (1998) argues that community research should include both the analysis of external representations of the community in question and the analysis of the everyday experience of living in that community. The media, as a dominant carrier of external representations of ‘other’ communities, should, therefore, be a central part of a theory of the symbolic construction of communities.

### 3. The Media and the Social Construction of Community

Many commentators on ‘community’ have argued that the media play a central role *not* in the symbolic construction of a community, as I suggest, but that, rather, the growth and increasing sophistication of the media have contributed to the disintegration of local communities around the globe. Or, at least that television has ‘liberated’ community from spatial locality (Meyrowitz, 1986). Kirby (1989), for example, has claimed that electronic media are destroying our sense of locality, so that “places are increasingly like one another and ... the singularity ... and importance of ... locality is diminished” (p.323). Thus community has become increasingly dislocated from geography (Mitchell, 1995).

### 3.1. The media construct on-line communities

Morley (1996) claims that television programmes bring us “news of the ‘generalised elsewhere’ of other places and ‘non-local people’ and their similar ‘simultaneous experiences’ – thus undermining any sense of the primacy of ‘locality’”(p.336). It is most commonly through television that we encounter “the others in this globalising culture” (Robins, 1996, p.6). Changes in modern mass communications mean that it is possible to form and maintain links with communities of others who may live in far-flung places and cultures. “The transformations of place, and the intrusion of distance into local activities, combined with the centrality of mediated experience, radically change what ‘the world’ actually is” (Giddens, 1991, p.187). As place and locality no longer limit the boundaries of community, we are in the process of “planning and designing truly world-wide communities” (Mitchell, 1995, p.167). Communities are not disappearing; they are evolving under the pressures of globalisation. Communities are increasingly “unified beyond localities and fragmented within them” (Morley, 1996, p.336). Representations of communities, and so too community identities, are increasingly under threat, and therefore, increasingly fiercely asserted.

“The emergence of new media, and above all the Internet,” Silverstone (1999b) appreciates, “has produced a resurgence in, and a rekindled enthusiasm for, community” (p.11). These transformations in communications have attracted many media researchers to examine the emergence of so-called virtual communities (Rheingold, 1995; Wellman and Milena, 1999), electronic communities (Robins, 1996), cyber societies (Jones, 1998) and other Internet alliances (e.g. Surratt, 1998). These are often romantic visions, inviting the hope that changes in technoculture “could create new forms of sociality and bind together new kinds of community” (Robins, 1996, p.11). Rheingold, for example, argues that this development in mass communications is fuelled by “the hunger for community that grows in the breasts of people around the world as more and more informal public spaces disappear from our real lives” (1994, p.6). There is a hope that “we shall be able to rebuild the neighbourhood community and the small-town public sphere and, in a world in which every citizen is networked to every other citizen, we can expand this ideal (or myth) to the scale of the global village” (Robins, 1996, p.86). While it is true that new media do extend the possibility of communal cultures, it is

important not to conflate communal networks and community. What constitutes these communities? Who has the right to speak, or write, for them? Who controls the right of access? How does a community identity emerge? These are essential questions, and ones that these studies often lay aside (Silverstone, 1999b).

### 3.2. The media construct off-line communities

While these new communities are indeed fascinating to those interested in computer-mediated communications in the late modern era, it is important not to neglect the role of the media in the social construction of 'off-line' located communities, such as Brixton. Robins has accused media studies of 'community' which exclude 'real' communities of turning "a blind eye on the world we live in" (Robins, 1996, p.85). Changes in communications have not only fragmented and displaced some local communities; they have also contributed to the salience of other 'real' communities (Burgess, 1978). Just as the media contribute to the coherence of national identities (Morley, 1996), media images and narratives of place play an important part in constituting more local communities as Thompson (1995) has suggested:

... as our sense of the world and our place in it becomes increasingly nourished by media products, so too our sense of the groups and communities with which we share a common path through time and space, a common origin and a common fate, is altered; we feel ourselves to belong to groups and communities which are constituted in part through the media. (p.35).

While it is undeniable that new media and technologies have altered our understanding of geography and community, I do not agree that these have led to the "shredding" of existing communities (Rheingold, 1994, p.25). As Robins (1996) forcefully states "anybody who is even half awake to the world can surely see that 'geography' is far from being abolished, and that localised and territorial investments and conflicts will remain a fundamental issue in the new world order" (p.7). Anyone doubting the significance of representations of local communities should remember the horrific bombs planted in Brixton, Brick Lane and Soho in April 1999, which clearly demonstrated the fact that certain representations of communities can produce very real, very shocking and very bloody consequences. In total 3 people were killed and over 115 people were injured in these three related attacks (*The Guardian*, 1 May 1999).

The media play a powerful role in representing and so constructing locality and community to the world at large, as Morley and Robins (1995) have demonstrated. These media representations can inform, develop and challenge how people think about communities and so what a community 'is'. "On the one hand, the media may convey favourable impressions of particular places; on the other, they may reflect various kinds of more deeply rooted, stereotyped images" (Burgess, 1978, p.14). For those from the community in question, these representations can be something to question, challenge and reject.

### 3.3. Brixton: The media construct community and identity

Brixton is continually presented and so re-created in the British media as a distinct locality, and so identifiably different to "the generalised elsewhere" (Morley, 1996, p.336). These representations do far more than simply describe an area; they imbue the area with meanings that affect how Brixton is thought about, how it is discussed in dominant discourses, how it is experienced, and how, too, Brixtonites think of themselves.

Television news and documentaries do not only present versions of "distant locales" and 'other' peoples (Thompson, 1995, p.228); they can be about us, our communities, and our selves (Ryan, 1999). It is possible that "viewers watch themselves, their neighbours and the strangers and aliens that surround them" (Robins, 1996, p.140). Television can tell us how others see us, how our locality is constructed by the outside world. It can so inform, develop and challenge our representations of our own communities. In this way, mediated experiences collide with our non-mediated experiences.

People in Brixton learn how others view them through such presentations, and these inform their own view of Brixton and so of themselves. In this way television acts as 'the generalised other' (Mead, 1934). Through acknowledging the perspective of the outsider to Brixton, those from the area become self-conscious of their relationship with Brixton. Recognising the perspective of the other may entail endorsing it, developing it, or rejecting it. Whichever the case, media representations form a basis for community identities to be developed both against and through. Seeing one's self and one's

community in the eye of the media can have “unsettling consequences, both for individuals and for the communities of which they are a part” (Thompson, 1995, p.212). “Media representations” Silverstone (1999a) recognises, “have consequences for how we see and live in the world” (p. 138). They have consequences for how we see and live ‘community’. They both frame and inform the living of community. Communities and those associated with them can be stigmatised through the media, as I shall go on to illustrate.

### 3.4. Media representations as stigma

What makes Brixton a particularly fruitful place to do this research is the fact that many outside perceptions of the area are not shared by those who live in the general locality of Brixton. “Television’s effectiveness consists in its ability to translate the unfamiliar into the familiar and to provide frameworks for making sense of the unintelligible” (Silverstone, 1981, p.181). In the case of Brixton, television makes an unfamiliar ‘other’ community familiar, intelligible and interesting to outsiders. What is problematic for those who live in the locality, is that this is often in ways that stigmatise and otherise Brixton, often unintentionally. The images and narratives presented in the media are sometimes disparaging and, in the views of many in the study, racist.

Dominant representations of Brixton in the media encourage, or ‘prefer’, certain associations over others. As Hall (1981) has pointed out, “the ideological concepts embodied in the photos and texts in a newspaper (or in other forms of media), then, do not produce new knowledge about the world. They produce recognitions of the world as we have already learned to appropriate it” (p.239). For example, the media tend to portray Brixton as a “black community” (Louise) and draw on hegemonic representations of black people to translate images of Brixton into a version of the world already familiar (where black people are criminal, aggressive and deviant).

While the case of Brixton is unique, it provides the social psychologist with rich material with which to unpack the intricate relationships between representation, identity and the social construction of a community. Social psychology, with one eye on the individual and one eye on the social, needs to address the problem of community. In

theorising the relation between self and other, individual and society, and different groups, a theory of representations of communities and community identities clearly should be a part of our discipline.

#### 4. The Theory of Social Representations

As I have argued above, we need a social psychological theory that rests on Hegelian logic to examine the dialectics of community. The theory of social representations<sup>5</sup> does exactly this by drawing on an organic conception of the mutually constitutive relationship between the individual and the world which she inhabits. “It hopes to elucidate the links which unite human psychology with contemporary social and cultural questions” (Moscovici, 1998, p.241). To my mind, this perspective, more rigorously than most others within our discipline, has theorised the intricacies of the intersubjectivity of both society and self. It is a perspective which allows a dual focus: on self and on society. Its gaze is centred on the in-between, the bonds that sustain mutual understanding while establishing difference. Because the theory tackles the dialectics of cohesion and diversification, and of collectivity and individuality, it is well equipped to analyse the symbolic and socio-cognitive processes behind the construction of, the fragmentation of, and insistence on, community in a global age. The aim of the rest of this chapter is to demonstrate the value of choosing social representations as the theoretical framework of my study.

##### 4.1. What are social representations?

Social representations are “systems of values, ideas and practices” which simultaneously “establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it” and “enable communication to take place among the members of *a community* by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history. (Moscovici, 1973, p.xiii, emphasis added).

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<sup>5</sup> The ‘theory’ that Moscovici originally proposed in 1961 has been developed extensively to cover now an impressive range of objects of study, methods and distinct theoretical concerns. Different ‘schools’ of social representations are contested and different approaches challenged (e.g. the structural approach elaborated by Abric, 1993). It would be more accurate to describe the work done under the umbrella label ‘social representations’ as a perspective. However, for the sake of clarity, and to distinguish the theory and the phenomenon, I shall adopt the term ‘theory’.



Social representations are systems of knowledge, mutual understanding and practices. They are the tools which people use to make sense of their worlds, to interpret the novel, the unfamiliar, and the strange. Social representations are similar to both Schutz' (1971) concept "recipes", which we use to make our social worlds knowable and predictable, and to Merleau-Ponty's (1963) use of "forms", which he sees as organising our perceptions of both physical and social environments. Social representations guide people through the shifting scenes, developing characters, and twisting story lines of their everyday activities. They enable people to embed themselves within communities of others, and build bonds of association while establishing unique identities. Social representations both enable communities to come together, to bond and construct an identity, and they enable individual members in a community to weave and inhabit a unique identity which distinguishes them from the rest of their claimed communities.

#### 4.2. From collective to social

Moscovici uses the term 'social' representation to distinguish the concept from Durkheim's (1898) notions of 'collective' and 'individual' representations. For Durkheim a collective representation is a "social fact" which is imposed on us, difficult to challenge, static and uniform in its effects. Individual representations are the personal interpretations of distinct individuals. Moscovici recognised that collective representations are more profuse in traditional societies, where there is comparative uniformity in belief and knowledge.<sup>6</sup> For in these societies there is "less scope for individuality – for original, unique, or creative thinking and behaviour" (Mead, 1972, p.221) and little opportunity of competing knowledge-systems developing. In contemporary society, different sciences, different religions, and different knowledge systems compete for followers from around the globe. As a result there is more critique,

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<sup>6</sup> In describing contemporary realities, Moscovici has avoided the term 'collective representations', unlike others (e.g. Farr 1998). Instead Moscovici (1988) discusses 'hegemonic representations' which are those all-pervasive representations rooted in systems of power. Whether one calls them 'collective' or 'hegemonic' there are clearly today still particular broad-ranging and resistant representations. Individualism, both a cause and consequence of the diversity and fragmentation evident in late modernity, is one of our most dominant representations (Farr, 1991b). Other hegemonic representations include representations of nature (Gervais, 1997), gender (Lloyd and Duveen, 1992), and, I would suggest, evolution. As we shall see later, we can also call 'racism' a hegemonic representation of black people.

argument and debate and so less stability in knowledge systems (Giddens, 1992). Most collective representations have now fragmented under these pressures, giving birth to more dynamic and unstable representational fields (Jovchelovitch, 1996). Under the pressures of globalisation, meanings become highly contested and negotiated, as Lewis (1994) recognises:

Meanings becomes a battleground between and among folk cultures, class subcultures, ethnic cultures, and national cultures; different communications media, the home, and the school; churches and advertising agencies; and different versions of history and political ideologies. The sign is no longer inscribed within a fixed cultural order. The meaning of things seems less predictable and less certain. (p.25).

Just as collective representations have been transformed into social representations under the conditions of late modernity, the same pressures have splintered fixed and uniform communities into more diverse and dynamic communities. Community, Silverstone (1999b) argues, is “undermined by modernity” (p.5). This century, since the dramatic effect of the world wars on boundaries of all kinds (national, ethnic, class, religious, urban/rural, gender, as well as geographic), communities have become increasingly unstable, divided by difference, and reactive to change (Wellman and Milena, 1999). This does not mean that the notion of community is obsolete, as I have already established. What it does mean, however, is that the concept of community “needs to be updated to meet today’s challenges” (Schuler, 1996, p.9). As social scientists we need to refine our tools for the analysis of community as it is lived in contemporary realities.

As Silverstone (1999a), has argued communities have changed from pre-modern, to modern and to late-modern times. Theories of community too often tend to over-emphasise the homogeneity and permanence of community (e.g. Abrams, 1980), and thus are unable to fully grasp the diverse and contested nature of many communities today. Social representations are born under the very same conditions that have transformed contemporary communities (Moscovici, 1984). Thus, the theory of social representations is well chosen to disentangle the complex relationship between diversity and conformity within the community, the threat and the appeal of difference, and the communal and subjective aspects of self.

### 4.3. Social re-presentation and social representations

We can talk of social representations as the evolving products of shared understandings, and of social re-presentation as a socio-cognitive activity that produces these representations. That is, there are social representations of certain socially significant objects (guns and crucifixes, for example), practices (weddings and circumcision), cultures and groups of people (the Germans, African-Caribbeans, policemen and single mothers), and even of certain renowned individuals (Diana Princess of Wales and the Pope). Social representations of individuals have much in common with Emler's (1990) theory of 'reputations'. An important difference is, however, that the theory of social representations concentrates on the reputations of social groups, such as the mad (Morant, 1997), the disabled (Farr and Marková, 1995), and different genders (Lloyd and Duveen, 1992), rather than the reputation of individuals (Emler and Reicher, 1995).

Social re-presentation is a socio-cognitive performance. It is something we do in order to understand the worlds in which we live and, in doing so, we convert these social representations into a social reality, for others and for ourselves. Through social re-presentation communities are performed (Silverstone, 1999b). In learning about the world in which we live we take on particular 'presentations' of that world, and re-interpret them to fit with what we know 'already'. That is, we take on 'presentations' and re-present them. In this process the social representation may be confirmed or perhaps re-articulated in some way. Here I have used a hyphen when discussing the process or act of social re-presentation to highlight the fact that representations are constantly re-interpreted, re-thought, re-presented.

Social representations, as such, are never fixed. They are malleable and dynamic. Using a particular representation in a certain context, to make sense of a particular experience, may influence the social representation itself. There are various ways in which this may occur. It may, for instance, reaffirm the representation by adding information, colour and depth, or it may alter the emphasis in the representation, change its direction, sever connections, or perhaps even shatter its coherence. In Brixton, for example, many people drew on the same representation of Brixton as Diverse, with different effects. Both a version of Brixton as a strange and alien community *and* a version of Brixton as

an exciting and exotic community are supported by the representation of Brixton as Diverse.

#### 4.4. The contradictory nature of social representations

How is it that we can conceive of the individual, yet shared, the prescriptive, yet malleable, nature of social representations? Social representations, as Abric (1993) has described, are both “consensual but marked by strong inter-individual differences” (p.75). This means that representations are both uniform and multiple, stable and dynamic, shared and personal. How can this be?

In the use and manipulation of social representations it is not *all* of a representation that is open to elaboration, development or contradiction. The representation is not completely transformed each and every time. There are different constituents in a representation. Abric distinguishes between ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ elements of a representation (Pereira de Sá, 1996). Other theorists of social representations have employed similar notions to describe the central features of a representation: for example “position-generating principles” (Doise, 1990), “a hard-core” (Mugny and Carugati, 1985), and “a representative nodal” (Jodelet, 1991). The core of a representation is the ‘heart’, the fundamental elements of a social representation “determined by historical, sociological, and ideological conditions” (Abric, 1993, p.74). It is “stable, coherent, consensual and historically marked” (p.76). It resists change and is relatively continuous and consistent. The periphery is more responsive to concrete reality. Peripheral elements are open to challenge and revision, and are “flexible, adaptive and relatively heterogeneous” (p.77).

The value of this distinction is asserted again in Chapter Five, where I discuss the process of analysis of the central and peripheral elements of the social representations found in my data. It is worth pointing out, however, that there are some potential dangers in over-working the distinction. There is, for example, a certain amount of research on the measurement of the ‘core’ and the ‘periphery’ (e.g. Moliner, 1995). This tends to lead to a certain sterility, in trying to capture and reify the essence of something which is essentially dynamic. In my view, focus should be on the processes of social re-

presentation, as well as the end products which, by their very nature, are not easily measured or pinned down.

This distinction is, however, very useful as it allows us to conceptualise simultaneously the subjective and the social aspects of social re-presentation. Through interaction with other representations, the core of representations becomes distinct. Peripheral elements may be altered to fit one's own perspective, experience and identifications. However, the stability of even the core of a representation is relative. The significance of the core versus the periphery varies in different types of social representations. Hegemonic representations, those representations which make up the ideologies of cultures (Moscovici, 1988), are comparatively unchanging over time and so are almost completely dominated by the central nucleus of ideas. Other representations, particularly those that oppose the dominant order, are more contested and so more reactive to the peripheral elements of the representation.<sup>7</sup> Different forms of representations, old, hegemonic and relatively new, oppositional representations, coexist (Marková and Farr, 1995). Within this study, for example, ideological representations, such as 'black as animalistic' and relatively novel representations, such as 'difference as liberty' coexist.

#### 4.5. Social re-presentation as a socio-cognitive process

Representations surround us, entice us and are all pervasive (Moscovici, 1988). In becoming aware of them, we incorporate them into our current ways of understanding, i.e. into the social representations which we have already developed. How does this actually happen? In modern cultures we tend to (a) anchor and (b) objectify representations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> These include what Moscovici defines as emancipated and polemical representations. The former "are the outgrowth of the circulation of knowledge and ideas belonging to subgroups" that are marginalised from the main spheres of public debate. The later are "generated in the course of social conflict, social controversy and society as a whole does not share them" (Moscovici, 1988). Within the context of my research the boundaries between these two forms of representations are too unclear to make this distinction. Instead, I simply discuss oppositional or alternative representations, which are both emancipated and polemical.

<sup>8</sup>This is an illuminating point as it sheds light on what Moscovici may think the status of his own ideas is. If the processes of re-presentation are dependent on culture, then the theory Moscovici is offering us is *not* one based on universals (as Billig has claimed, 1991). This echoes Levy-Bruhl's (1926) suggestion that different types of societies develop different types of mentalities.

Anchoring integrates new phenomena into existing world-views in order to lessen the shock of the new. Anchoring involves ascribing meaning to the object being represented. “By classifying what is unclassifiable, naming what is unnamable, we are able to imagine it, to represent it” (Moscovici, 1984, p.30). The process of social representation is like fastening a floating boat to a buoy, moored in social and cognitive space. New images are then attached to a recognisable reference point, and generalised or particularised to the familiar categories of everyday cognition (Moscovici, 1981a). In the course of anchoring the unfamiliar in the familiar, representations are modified (Moscovici, 1988; Bartlett, 1932). As the general public first became aware of the relatively recent disease, AIDS, for example, representations of AIDS were anchored in historic representations of the plague (Marková and Farr, 1995). In this way representations of the plague were transformed by virtue of serving as anchors to the novel.

This is not, however, a neutral process (Jodelet, 1991). By classifying a person, a thing, an event, or a nation, we are at the same time assessing and evaluating it/her. Within this study, for example, I have found that historic representations of the poor and of black people are incorporated into other representations of crime and come to form contemporary representations of Brixton. By looking at how dominant discourses manipulate representations in the service of particular interests we can study the ideological use of social representations.

The process of objectification produces a domestication of the unfamiliar in a way that is more active than anchoring because it saturates the idea of unfamiliarity with reality, turning it into the very essence of reality. This produces the materialisation of an abstraction (Moscovici, 1981). Wagner’s work on the social representations of reproduction, particularly our visual representation of the sperm, is a good illustration of this (Wagner *et al*, 1995). In this way images cease to be images or signs; they become a part of reality (Moscovici, 1984). A very powerful and destructive representation of Brixton, with which both insiders and outsiders are familiar, is a visual image of a riot. For example, a school teacher from Brixton told me that “people think of Brixton in terms of images of gangsters, drugs, sort of unruly black people rioting”.

This image of Brixton is often found in media representations. The media play a central role in the production, dissemination and debate over different representations and the images on which they rest. In her study of images of madness on television, Rose (1996) found that “the visual dimension of television is ideal for rendering the abstract concrete” (p.303). Through objectification, Moscovici (1984) has explained, “images become elements of reality, rather than elements of thought”. As we shall go on to see in this thesis, images of Brixton presented in the media inform, constrain and disrupt the social reality of living in Brixton.

The two processes of anchoring and objectifying, though analytically distinguishable, are interdependent. If a representation is securely anchored, it must also be objectified, and *vice versa*. Lloyd and Duveen (1992) provide a clear example of this: “the description of electrons circling an atom was *anchored* in an earlier physical model of planets rotating around a sun. Once *anchored* in this way the model is *objectified* so that the reality of the atom is construed in terms of orbiting electrons/planets” (p.21, italics in the original).

Anchoring and objectification organise social re-presentation. Can we now define social representations themselves? This is a difficult task as the perspective of social representations is too elaborate and too rich to be easily compressed into a single definition (Moscovici, 1988). Farr (1998), however, has defined a representation as “social when it is, or has been, in two minds or more minds” (p.291). Many questions spring from this minimalist definition. What is the effect of having a representation “in mind”? What happens when people have different representations? How do these representations come into our minds? Is it possible to have conflicting representations in our minds at the same time? Why do we have some representations instead of others? Who has power over the mediation of representations? And one could go on. For the purposes of my research, a useful way of addressing these questions is to examine the relationship between social re-presentation and the social construction of a community.

## 5. Using Social Representations to Theorise Community

What I want to illustrate in this thesis is that communities become meaningful through social representations. Communities are bound together through the creation and elaboration, the imposition and rejection, of social representations. Social representations facilitate a common culture among members of a community. Being a code for knowledge, and a yardstick by which the new is assessed, they allow for an intersubjectively shared means of collective understanding and communication. Social representations are formed in inter-individual communication and social interaction (Moscovici, 1984). They can be described as shared stocks of knowledge which help us to understand the communities in which we live and our own position in relation to them. In the performance of ‘social re-presentation’ communities form, maintain and defend what it is that they have in common and what differentiates them from those beyond community borders. Representations about communities are, therefore, statements of community identities. In re-presenting a community, we reject community affiliation or assert a claim to community membership.

The theory of social representations can explain how people make sense of communities, identify with communities, stigmatise communities and assert community loyalties. Let me explain:

### 5.1. Performing community

Men live in a community by virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common... are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge – a common understanding – likemindedness as sociologists say. Such things cannot be passed physically from one to another like bricks; they cannot be shared as persons would share a pie by dividing it into physical pieces... Consensus demands communication. (Dewey, 1916, pp.5-6).

“Just like trees, rocks, and rivers, so languages, institutions and traditions, form a panorama of the world people live in” (Marková and Farr, 1995, p.180). In order to sustain these languages, institutions and traditions, communities must share a common means of exchanging meanings and ideas; they must also share particular symbols, histories and aspirations. Social representations become both the medium of this



exchange and the content of exchange at one and the same time. “The reality of community in people’s experience thus inheres in their attachment or commitment to a common body of symbols” Cohen suggests (1995, p.16). Social representations, as Moscovici (1990) has stated, are “not mental creations that have social consequences, they are *social creations*, constructed via mental processes, that acquire reality”. It is through social representations that communities establish a common reality. In making this point Moscovici cites the work of Lewin: “Reality for the individual is, to a high degree, determined by what is socially accepted as reality” (Lewin, 1948).

This reality has to be confirmed by the reality of other community members. We make sense of things by assessing the reactions of others. The meaning of an act is found in the nature of the response it elicits from others, as Mead (1934) has told us. Thus, through the process of social re-presentation, we come to learn about the world and we learn what are the current ways of attaching meaning to social and physical objects around us. In sharing the representations around us, not only do we come to build a common understanding, we also come to embed ourselves in the communities significant to us.

Communities, as I understand them, are built on and through social representations. That is, social representations make the sharing of symbols, knowledge, rituals and aspirations possible. They provide the codes through which values, ideas and practices are expressed (Moscovici, 1973). They also shape the cultural practices and institutions that constitute the shared experience of a community (Jodelet, 1991). As such, communities are built ‘on’ social representations. But as representations are ‘alive’ in that they transform over time and context, communities evolve. Thus communities are built ‘through’ social representations. Without social representations one would be unable to participate in community activities, to locate oneself within a community, to differentiate one’s claimed communities from other communities, and to contribute to the evolution of community values and practices.

Social representations socialise individuals into communities and bind the community together through common knowledge, experience, identity and the social construction of

place, as I have argued above. Thus social re-presentation, as a performance, constructs community from within. However, what gives the community and its representations their distinction is the realisation of difference. A community would not form a sense of being a community, without the recognition of what is 'elsewhere' - the world other-to-them. Thus community identities are not born within the community, so to speak; they emerge at the borders of community, where a community meets the rest of society and so learns of its own difference. To make sense of community, therefore, we need to examine social representations about the community at the boundaries of community. Cohen (1995) has made this point in relation to the symbolic boundaries found in the Shetland archipelago:

The reality of community in the lives of its members, ... is symbolic. The same must also be true of its boundary. The sea may divide one island from another, just as the parish border may mark the beginning and end of a settlement. But these boundaries are symbolic receptacles filled with meanings that members impute to and perceive in them. (p.19).

I see such "meanings" as social representations. These representations are far more than ways of understanding or ways of describing the Brixton community, in this case. They come to constitute community. They form the lived reality of those who live in the area and those who come into contact with the area "by affording certain perceptions and constraining others" (Oyserman and Markus, 1998, p.123). Back (1996) has discussed "semantic systems" that he claims constitute the "available resources that compete to project meaning out on the urban landscape" (p.240). He examines two different areas in South London, close to Brixton, and discovers different, though related, semantic fields that compete in the making of community. These systems are, as he recognises, "very important with reference to the nature of social identity amongst the young" who live in these areas (p.240). These systems are, I suggest, what Jovchelovitch (1996) has termed "representational fields" (p.125). Because social representations are the building blocks of identity, they too inform people's sense of self, sense of belonging, and sense of being in a community.

## 5.2. Identifying with the community

To become a member of Brixton, or any other community, to form a relationship with others in a community, it is essential to manage the representations of that community.

Through living in communities and sharing representations, community identities are created and developed. The community becomes the stage on which much social representation is performed and, through this ongoing drama, identities emerge. Cohen (1995) explains this at length:

Community is a largely mental construct, whose 'objective' manifestations in locality or ethnicity give it credibility. It is highly symbolised, with the consequence that its members can invest it with their selves. Its character is sufficiently malleable that it can accommodate all of its members' selves without them feeling their individuality to be overly compromised. Indeed, the gloss of commonality which it paints over its diverse components gives to each of them an additional referent for their identities. (pp.108-9).

Community is something that emerges out of our need to locate ourselves in the social worlds where we live. It emerges from our needs to both belong and to be different (Arendt, 1958). "We are only separate (singular)", Morris (1996) has pointed out, "because of our being-in-common – without community we are deprived of our finite existence" (p.233). In establishing an identity we negotiate a position, a perspective, a viewing-point from where we see, understand, and re-present the world. This position gains its significance from a complex network of inter-relationships that we build with others. These relationships define both identity and difference. It is through both identifying with others and distinguishing ourselves from others that we locate ourselves, and are located by others, in particular communities. One cannot establish or assert an identity, without, at the same time, establishing what it is that one shares with others, what links one to various communities, and establishing what differentiates oneself from others, what makes one unique. In stating who you are you state also who you are not. These are not challenges to be faced alone: identities are co-constructed with the support and the restrictions that others offer. Community, how one is part of it, how one is cut off from it, is an important part of the formation of identity.

Social representations provide the building blocks of identity (Lloyd and Duveen, 1992). To construct social representations involves proposing an identity. Social representations enable an understanding of one's past to fit with aspirations for the future. This happens on both an individual and a societal level (Himmelweit and Gaskell, 1990). "The sense of oneself and the sense of belonging to a collective are both

shaped by the knowledge, traditions, values and practices one shares with members of the community”, as Gervais and Jovchelovitch (1998a, p. 712) have shown with reference to the Chinese community in England. In each interaction we use the social representations of our past to make sense of the unknown, and the yet-to-be-experienced. As such they are the fabric of our narratives of self and of community.

Identifying with a community is not an unconstrained and voluntary act. There are some communities with which we are connected through the gaze of the other. Communities can, in this way, be imposed onto us. Representations, Hall (1997) has pointed out, “sometimes call our very identities into question. We struggle over them because they matter – and these are contests from which serious consequences can flow. They define what is ‘normal’, who belongs – and therefore, who is excluded” (p.10). Representations of Brixton, we shall see, encourage, constrain and contest the identities of those who live in the area.

### 5.3. Stigmatising the community

The everyday knowledge, beliefs and practices of communities make up the social psychological environment into which we are born, and in which we develop an identity. While we play a part in transforming the representations of our claimed communities, to a certain degree these representations are “imposed” onto us (Moscovici, 1984). A community cannot simply establish and develop an identity in isolation from the pressures and influences from outside that community. Community is not, as some theorists have suggested, “a voluntary construction” (Ahlbrandt, 1984, p.4). The material presented in Part II of this thesis clearly demonstrates that the representations within a community are not immune to, and unconstrained by, the representations outside that community. The inner representations and identities develop in relation to and, at times, in reaction against, the representations that others have of them. There is a dialectical relationship between these representations. The meaning that Brixton acquires, then, is something contested, and something continually contested, between those on either side of the material and symbolic borders of Brixton.

All groups in society manipulate the distribution and circulation of representations in defending their own interests. Some groups, however, especially those with access to the construction of media representations, have more resources to impose their interests over others. Some groups, as Thompson (1990) has recognised, have more power to “make meaning stick”. Hence, we are not equally placed in the social construction of a community. Dominant groups, such as the media, political elite’s, the church, state institutions, and the social groups representing these elites construct, dispense and impose particular representations which support their own interests and their own construction of the world.

Children from Brixton told me that the media “downgrade” Brixton and make it seem “bad”. Researching the meaning of community in Brixton, where questions of identity, of loyalty and of recognising difference prevail, leads to questions of power. Because people are positioned differently, because they have different access to resources and to the public sphere of debate and critique, there are limits, negotiable and challengeable limits, but limits all the same, to the process of social representation. My study of social representations in the media addresses precisely these issues. Particular social representations of Brixton dominate the media - how challengeable are these? What are the consequences of using particular representations? Whose interests are being served by particular representations? How do social representations support or threaten particular identities? Which social representations are being marginalised or suppressed? Whose characterisation of ‘Brixton’ has authority? These questions need to be tackled through an empirical investigation, as the rest of this thesis lays out.

We can say that ‘outsiders’ collectively construct knowledge about the community, and so contribute to the social representations and stereotypes about those within the community. Stereotyping, as Hall (1997) sees it, “is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant’, the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological’, the ‘acceptable’ and the ‘unacceptable’, what belongs and what does not or is ‘Other’, between ‘insiders and ‘outsiders’, us and Them” (p.258). As such, stereotypes provide a basis for establishing and defending identity (Gilman, 1985). They can be seen to be stigmatising social representations.

However, there is a significant difficulty with the term 'stereotype' for the social psychologist. In the history of our discipline, stereotypes have been de-socialised, along with many other concepts (Graumann, 1986). A stereotype has been defined as "a cognitive structure that contains the perceiver's knowledge, beliefs and expectancies about some human group" (Hamilton and Troler, 1986, p. 133). As Tajfel (1981) recognised, much social psychological research on stereotypes stands "in stark contrast to the awareness of the social dimension of the problems" of stereotypes (p.145). Within a thesis that seeks to stress the social construction of community, the reactive nature of social representations and the intersubjective nature of identities, the term 'stereotype' is one best avoided. Hence, for the most part, I shall use the term 'stigmatising social representations'.

In Chapter Seven I show how social representations of Brixton stigmatise the area and those who live there. For example, Brixton is often presented as a 'bad' community, and associated with crime and drugs. The objects of such representations – those who live in the Brixton area - cannot ignore others' beliefs about them. Social representations held by others will invade their understanding of themselves, and force them to reject, accept or challenge these representations. When people in Brixton do not share outside representations of where they live, and when these representations are denigrating, the community is stigmatised. Just as Goffman (1968) described how social identities can become spoiled, this particular study of Brixton reveals how a community as a whole is spoiled. Goffman's definition of stigma is useful:

Stigma is "an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated. ... By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a *stigma theory*, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents. (p.15, italics added).

In everyday discourse social representations can be manipulated into '*stigma theories*' to emphasise the strangeness, the inferiority and the threat that a whole community supposedly poses. Breakwell (1986) has demonstrated how social representations threaten the self-identities and self-esteem of stigmatised groups, such as the unemployed. It is not the case that some representations stigmatise, and others promote

more positive versions of self and community. My research illustrates that the same representations of Brixton are used to denigrate and to affirm community. Chapter Six provides a detailed example of this: it focuses on the dominant social representation of Brixton and shows how it is used both to stigmatise Brixton and to reject this stigma. What is valuable about the approach of social representations for studying stigma, is that it focuses attention on the “sociohistorical context or the cultural milieu within which the individual experiences stigma”, which is often marginalised in research on stigma (Becker and Arnold, 1986, p.39).

#### 5.4. Asserting community

Communities are united, at a bare minimum, by the shared experience of being seen by others as a community. Members of a community recognise the representations of others in forming a relatively coherent community identity. This is not to say that these representations are accepted without challenge. The very process of social representation allows that even the most hegemonic of representations may be elaborated and transformed. For example, in using representations to sustain the narrative of self and of community, individuals and communities rework these representations in relating them to their social memory, their common culture and their aspirations for the future. The space between the representations of others and one’s own representations is a potential space, a space for challenge, for protest, and for change (Winnicott, 1971). In studying the meeting of the different perspectives of insiders and outsiders to Brixton, the imposition and rejection of social representations comes to light.

While it is true that communities have certain representations imposed on them, no representation is unchallengeable. This is because representations are contingent and reactive. Thus representations of the community are debated, challenged and transformed. Children in Brixton, for example, collectively manipulate the damaging representations that others have of them, to create a more positive way of describing and experiencing Brixton. The experiences of living in a stigmatised community are not solely of oppressive stigma and spoilt identities. Recognising prejudice in the eye of the other, resisting this prejudice, and learning to construct more affirming versions of the

community, are difficult challenges. If they are met and overcome, children living with stigmatising representations may develop into confident, assertive and proud adults.

### In conclusion

What a geographical area or a social group means to us, how we experience it, how we live it, is understood through the collectively constructed representations which we give to these spaces. Thus, while set within a physical locality and/or intergroup relations, the experience of being a particular community, of visiting it or of hearing about it, communities are lived through the social representations we collectively construct of them. Social representations of communities constitute the process and the content of the living of community.

Communities impinge into people's lives; they orient the social construction of knowledge; they ground the negotiation of identity; they establish both difference and similarity; they empower us. As such, communities are central to the social psychology of humankind. They have not, however, been given the attention they deserve in the academic discipline of social psychology. Our concern, as social psychologists, must be how one of the most central concerns of psychology, the self, creates, defends, challenges, and is shaped by, representations of community.

Communities, I have argued, exist through the use and development of social representations. However, this is not to say that communities *only* exist in so far as we believe in, and know about, them. Communities exist in the practices and institutions which define community identity. Communities exist because the experience of them is real: community membership affects educational, employment and social achievement. Communities exist because they allow us to belong to, and to develop emotional bonds within, the community (Crow and Allen, 1994). Communities exist because they are meaningful to us: they may be the source of our pride, comfort, pain and shame. What links the different layers of community are social representations. In exploring identities and social representations in Brixton, I hope to demonstrate the importance of establishing a social psychology of community. It is to my study that I now turn.



## CHAPTER 3

### Accessing the Community

#### 1. The Journey of Research

- 1.1. Validity and subjectivity
- 1.2. Entering the field
- 1.3. (Re)Presenting Brixton
- 1.4. The researcher-researched relationship
- 1.5. The value of difference

#### 2. The Theory of Methods

- 2.1. Researching community
- 2.2. Participating and observing
- 2.3. Triangulation and social representations
- 2.4. Representations in different media

#### 3. Different Perspectives

- 3.1. Adolescents as experts
- 3.2. Inter-viewing school 'gatekeepers'
- 3.3. Focusing on community
- 3.4. 'Who am I?'
- 3.5. Analysing media representations
- 3.6. Follow-up and feedback

“Investigating the nature of community life is not a straightforward matter” (Crow and Allan, 1994, p.2). In order for the reader to access and assess the research process, the researcher’s developing relationship with the research field must be laid open. This is the aim of this chapter: to expose the history of the research project, the choice of study, the selection of participants and methods, my influence on the researcher-researched relationship, and the interplay between theory, method and analysis. A common thread runs through these related topics: all aspects of social scientific methodologies face the challenges of reactivity. I seek to explain how a rigorously *social* psychology can transform reactivity from a problem of methodology to a feature of human relations. As such, social psychological theories, and particularly the theory of social representations, can be of great value in guiding the choice of methods and subsequent analysis.

## 1. The Journey of Research

Any research project is a journey. In this chapter I take the reader back to the beginning of this journey. I explain how I came to study Brixton, my relationship with the area, why I chose particular methods of study. The story that is born of this journey is better judged given this knowledge. As other social scientists have recognised, “the ethnographer is both storyteller and scientist; the closer the reader of an ethnography comes to understanding the native’s point of view, the better the story and the better the science” (Devereux, 1998, p.150).

Ethnography, Back (1996) has explained, “can never claim to know the whole truth or even to approach it” (p.5). This is because “the voice of the ethnographer is privileged, that of the Other is muted” (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994, p.256). This thesis is written from my perspective. Although I included as many other voices as possible throughout the text, it is only mine that is presented as a complete whole. As such it is subjective. Subjectivity, however, can emerge only from inter-subjectivity (Giddens, 1991). That is, in order to develop my own perspective, I have to engage with the perspectives of others (Nagel, 1986).

A social researcher must learn from these other perspectives, acknowledge their truth-claims and expose the contradictions between perspectives. Her potential power in mis/re-presenting others is great. Many social researchers have recognised the importance of examining the ‘microphysics of power’ in research (Foucault, 1977), as do Ristock and Pennell (1996):

Power gets played out in the funding of the research, in the participants’ decision to participate, in the interactions between the researcher and the researched, in the way the data are interpreted, and in the use that is made of them. Moreover, both researcher and participants bring with them social histories of race, class, gender, sexuality, age and other power-associated differences in social position that reverberate throughout their interaction, whether the researcher pays attention to them or not. (p.65.)

This is the aim of this chapter: to present the ‘microphysics of power’ in my research. That is, I attempt to make explicit the history and the context of my research project.

### 1.1. Validity and subjectivity

The need to be explicit about research choices is often flagged within both Cartesian and Hegelian paradigms (Marková, 1982). Farr (1993) relates this requirement to the notion of replication: “it should be possible for others, who may be critical of your findings, to replicate your study in their own laboratories” (p.21). If the results of a study are not replicable, how do we know they are valid? For this reason, “every attempt is made to eliminate the effect of the observer by developing an explicit, standardised set of data elicitation procedures” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983, p.5). As historian of our discipline, Farr (1996) explains that this preoccupation stems from a positivistic philosophy and the ideology of behaviourism. Within a Cartesian paradigm there is the assumption that, if others cannot replicate my findings, then my research and its conclusions stem more from my subjectivity and my imposed assumptions than from the object of study itself (Willis, 1996).

For a Hegelian researcher these criticisms may seem naïve. The outcome of a research project always emerges from the interaction between researcher and researched (Silverstone, 1997). To replace the researcher would inevitably alter the dynamics of the project and lead to different conclusions (Riessman, 1993). These differences are not “biases and prejudices” (Denzin, 1970, p.133): they are the essence of human self-consciousness. Unlike natural sciences, where plants and minerals are oblivious to the gaze of the researcher, people respond in conscious and unconscious ways to the experience of being studied (Farr, 1978). As our objects of study, our participants, and our selves are all part of the social world, there will always be reactivity, subjectivity and relationship within social science research.

A researcher needs a clear theory to make sense of the subtly changing phenomena she studies. “There is nothing so practical as a good theory,” Lewin once famously remarked (de Board, 1978). Without such, one is lost. And yet the most effective test of a theory is to put it into practice. Thus we do not know how ‘good’ a theory is until we use it as a research tool. So there may be times when our theories leave us stranded in the field, immersed in data, and unsure of how to make sense of them. At this point the data begin to speak for themselves (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). They reveal gaps and

inconsistencies in the theory and hint at the remedy of these deficiencies. Theory guides method; method develops theory. To separate the two would limit the potential of the research process.

This whole process must be made explicit. This is not so that the reader may 'test' my findings as a natural scientist can verify the experimental findings of a colleague. Social science requires a different approach to the problems of reliability and validity from that of natural science (Kirk and Miller, 1986). Indeed, "rather than engaging in futile attempts to eliminate the effects of the researcher completely, we should set about understanding them" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.18). A research project presents a 'story' of the researcher's relationship with the subject of study. "What matters", as Miller and Glassner (1997) have argued, "is to understand how and where stories are produced, which sort of stories they are, and how we can put them to honest and intelligent use in theorising about social life" (p.111).

These comments apply particularly to studies of social representations. Social representations present these particular methodological challenges as they are, in essence, shared, unstable and reactive to change (Jahoda, 1988). That is, they are not 'replicable' (Farr, 1993). Changes in time and context and the presence of others can have dramatic effects on the content, structure and life of a social representation. This is because representations are negotiated between people, inscribed in particular practices and woven into different histories. The recognition of the reactivity of social psychological phenomena makes painstaking analysis of research methods an absolute necessity. "Knowledge of social worlds emerges from the achievement of intersubjective depth and mutual understanding", Miller and Glassner have stated (1997, p.106). It is from the desire to encourage this intersubjective understanding of his thesis that the Hegelian reveals his methods of study and invites the reader on the journey of research.

As Jovchelovitch (1995a) explains, "methodologies are practices, that is, concrete ways of doing something. As practices, they embody assumptions, involve routine procedures and therefore, should be highly explicit" (p.86). My cultural and academic histories

guide my choice of topic, my style of research, and my relationship to those in the research field. As Gergen (1973) pointed out, “it is the rare social psychologist whose values do not influence the subject of his research, his methods of observation, or the terms of description” (p.311). Revealing my personal and intellectual background, encourages the reader to ‘step into my shoes’, and so appreciate my perspective. If one is to understand my project, we have to attempt this journey together.

### 1.2. Entering the field

My knowledge of Brixton has developed over the last four years (from December 1995). Prior to this research interest I was an outsider to Brixton. Like many in London I might occasionally visit a Brixton pub or its cinema. It was simply an area in South London, with a lot of entertainment opportunities, a vibrant, multicultural ‘feel’ and a reputation for crime and drugs.

In December 1995 media coverage of a so-labelled ‘riot’ in Brixton caught my interest. The depiction of the riot in both tabloids and broad-sheets was generally disparaging and arguably racist, as was reportage of previous riots (Cohen and Gardner, 1982). The media as a whole drew on a social representation of riots that left little room for dissent or protest. This aroused my intellectual interest in the negotiation of social representations and of the power struggles involved, and led to a study of social representations of riots for a Master’s degree in Social Psychology. For an account of this work see Appendix III, where I look back, from my current perspective, on the research carried out for the Master’s dissertation of over three years ago.

Thus it was an interest in social representations of riots that led me to Brixton in the first place. Once there, I became fascinated by questions of re-presentation, of identity, of stigma and, most of all, of the social psychological significance and consequences of community. I did not enter Brixton with the assumption that I would find such questions, let alone the answers. I did not go there to study community. This is important, I feel. The focus of my current research, the social construction of community, arose from Brixton itself. Ethnographic research often has a “funnel structure, being progressively focused over its course” as Hammersley described it

(1983, p.206). My present research agenda has developed from my growing understanding of Brixton; it was not imposed onto Brixton from the outset. The very nature of Brixton, its multiculturalism, pride and prejudice, would lead many social researchers to the same questions, I imagine. *Brixton online* web pages inform the world that:

Living in Brixton is special – and its people are aware of this. Proud to be ‘South Londoners’, determined to resist the preconceived perception of outsiders, Brixtonians see themselves as part of a very special kind of area.  
(<http://www.brixton.co.uk>)

Brixton is not simply an area; it is an image, a significant marker, a symbolic construction. As I became more familiar with this I realised that there is a sharp contrast between media representations of Brixton and the social knowledge of those who live there. The self-knowledge of community members is challenged by outsiders’ impressions of the area. This research left me with a difficult question: how does a community manage and contest the stigmatising representations which others have of it?

In the face of prejudice, Brixton holds her head up high: proud to be different. As a local paper, *The Voice*, put it:

Brixton is a state of mind. It’s about caring about your community and it’s about struggling to prosper. The Brixton state of mind is about venturing to turn disadvantage into triumph. (13/04/88)

For both personal and academic reasons I found this fascinating. I was intrigued by the effect of ‘community’ in our everyday lives: how representations of where we live can be imposed upon us and how community identities may challenge these representations. And thus the particular questions of this research project were born.

Hence, I began this research with an interest in the interrelationship between identity, community, and stigma. The social psychological significance of such can be studied meaningfully only in a social context, as Breakwell (1986) has argued. Brixton presented itself as an ideal place in which to study these issues. Around the globe there are many such communities, where difference/similarity and identity/commonality resonate. Brixton is one such place with a reputation for cultural difference and discord.

Unlike many communities, however, it also has a reputation for being “a community that cares” (Brixton resident), and one that celebrates both its identity and its diversity.

With an interest in the dynamics involved in the negotiation of social representations and identities and the consequences thereof, Brixton soon became a fascination for me. For here there is an ongoing struggle over representation and identity. On my first day of fieldwork in the area I asked a resident if it was really ‘a community’. He replied that yes, it was, as “it is united against its enemy”: its enemy being its “reputation” (a Brixton restaurant manager). This struggle over the right of social recognition and self-determination brings people of all ethnicities, generations, religions and colours together as a community of difference.

### 1.3. (Re)Presenting Brixton

Before we continue along the journey of research, I need to assist readers in imagining Brixton for themselves. The history of the area is extremely rich. In skimming through a history book on Brixton one may come across references to Roman settlements, the Domesday Book, 18<sup>th</sup> century country retreats, wealth, urbanisation, London Railways, London’s first department stores, Electric Avenue, war-time decline, housing for immigrants, reggae and Rastafarianism, the ‘Brixton SS’, anti-police riots, poverty, discrimination, multiculturalism, rising prosperity and, in April 1999, ‘the Brixton bomb’. The people mentioned could include Brix - an 11<sup>th</sup> century Saxon chief, Edward the Confessor, Sir Henry Tate, Van Gogh, Mr Pears of Pears Soap, Charlie Chaplin, Ken Livingstone, John Major, Lord Scarman, David Bowie, Ian Wright and other colourful characters. This might give a flavour of the breadth and depth of the history of Brixton (see Appendix II for a brief history).

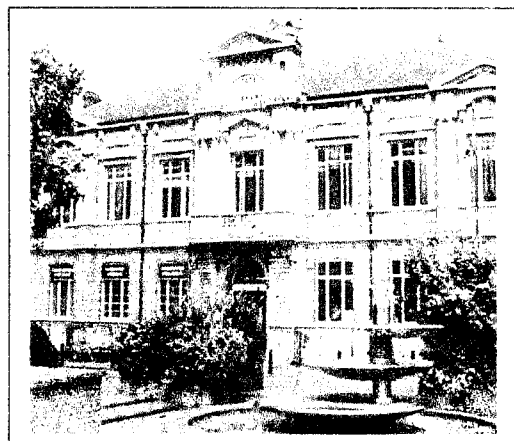
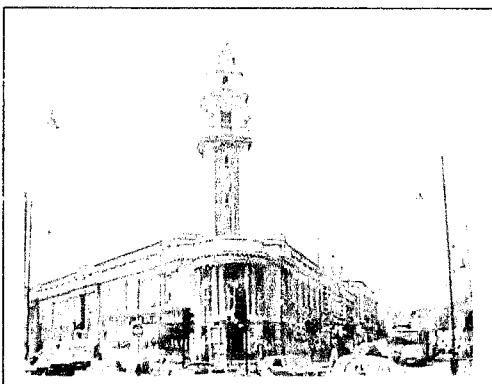
One form of representing an area is through social statistics. While there are none on Brixton *per se*, the statistics from the general area may be of interest to the reader. For instance there are statistics that cover the wider region around Brixton (the borough of Lambeth), and on distinct parts of Brixton (the wards of Town Hall, Angel and Ferndale). Statistics are still constructions of a reality, and not simply mirror images of a

reality. However, as one useful way of introducing how the area is represented, I have included these statistics in Appendix II.

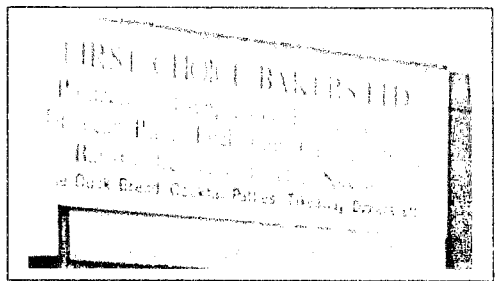
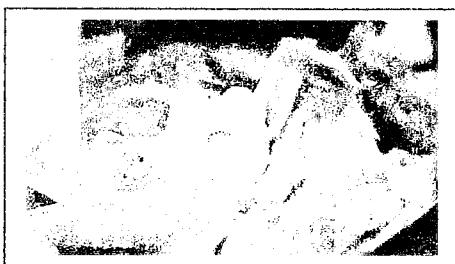
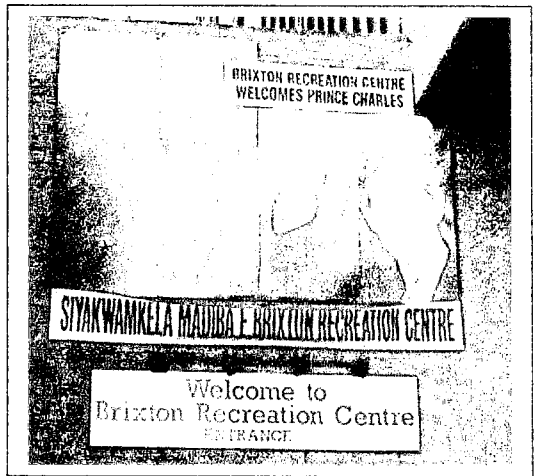
A presentation of an object, whether textual or graphic, will obviously incorporate the artist's social representations of that object. My description of Brixton obviously rides on particular social representations which support this version. In an attempt to avoid this as far as possible, I have chosen not to give a detailed description. After all, my aim is not to show the reader how I see Brixton. My aim is to reveal how others who live in the area, visit the area and report on the area perceive Brixton.

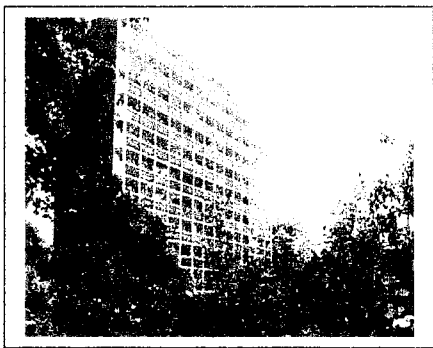
As we shall see in this thesis, perceptions of Brixton are highly visual, both for the lifetime residents and for the complete outsider. Hence, it is important that the reader is able to imagine something of Brixton: its colour, its crowded noisy streets, its style and elegance, its decay and squalor. I asked 'experts' on everyday life in Brixton to help me in this. These were school children already participating in the research as is explained below. Fifteen girls from two secondary schools came up with remarkably similar lists of images that would, they felt, reveal Brixton's character to someone who had not visited the area. In order to ensure that these were captured as the girls had imagined, five of them assisted me in the practicalities of taking these photographs.

They provide the reader with a means to develop their own pictures of the area, I hope, as well as enabling her to visualise the story which unfolds in this thesis. Rather than guide the reading of these photographs I shall refrain from using captions and leave the reader to make of them what she will. This is a useful technique that I have borrowed from Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) which emphasises the power of captions to direct interpretation. Brixton, one of the girls said, "is what you make of it". I invite you to make what you will of their photographs.









#### 1.4. The researcher-researched relationship

In the context of research, the old feminist slogan ‘the personal is the political’ means that we must start from the personal and indicate the ways in which our locations and identities as researchers inform and shape the research process. (Ristock and Pennell, 1996, p.66).

This means that one has to explicate one’s relationship with the researched. Do differences between the researcher and the researched stimulate or inhibit perceptive understanding? How far can one “write the Other’s culture?” (Corbey and Leerssen, 1991, p.ix). There is considerable debate about how far researchers can penetrate cultures and settings other than their own. There is little agreement on whether or not “researchers should be members of the groups we study, in order to have the subjective knowledge necessary to truly understand their life experiences” (Miller and Glassner, 1997, p.105). In the sociology of ‘race’, for example, there has been fierce argument as to how far white researchers can understand and empathise with black experiences of racism (e.g. Lawrence, 1981). Similarly, feminist researchers sometimes claim that male researchers cannot relate to issues that concern women (e.g. Stanley and Wise, 1993). In these cases there is the concern that “as a result of social distances, interviewees may not trust us, they may not understand our questions, or they may purposely mislead us in their responses” (Miller and Glassner, 1997, p.101). Whitehead (1986), for example, has revealed how his ‘brownness’ initially inhibited full acceptance into the black gang which he was studying.

By contrast, other researchers claim that studying one’s own familiar environment produces superficial accounts that fail to uncover the taken-for-granted relationships that are routine and mundane for the insider. For example, Finnegan (1989) has expressed concern that she may be “*too* much of an insider” in studying her own village community (p.343, italics in the original). Failing to establish distance may lead to the problem of ‘over-rapport’ as participants’ views merge with the researcher’s analysis. The risk, here, is failing to understand that one has *not* understood (Ichheiser, 1949). A more serious danger, as other researchers of community have recognised, is that “invoking insider status can result in intellectuals and ethnographers claiming a privileged right to speak for ‘the people’” (Back, 1996, p. 23). Ideally, community research projects should combine different perspectives of researcher-as-insider and

researcher-as-outsider, as Crow and Allan suggest (1994). For the PhD researcher this, of course, is not an option. The lone researcher can only strive “to be intellectually poised between familiarity and strangeness” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.112).

Suggestions that we can study only those similar to ourselves, rests on an essentialistic assumption that we fit into particular categories of others with the same intrinsic traits and concrete experiences. Because I am a woman I am better able to empathise with other women and so more likely to have rich and personal inter-views with them, as we share the same “voice” (Gilligan, 1993). I fundamentally disagree with this line of reasoning. To assume shared knowledge and experiences on the basis of common social identifications is patronising and dangerous, as other feminists have recognised (e.g. Butler, 1989). A serious consequence can be that the researcher’s perspective overrides the perspectives of others, and that the richness and variety of the community of study is lost. If the experiences of the researcher and of the researched are too similar there is little possibility of enlightenment.

It is my job both as a social psychologist and as a researcher to identify the similarities and differences I encounter with others. From here I can establish how to connect and communicate with others. I can highlight the difference between us and simultaneously try to bridge this difference. Difference exists only in so far as there is a common basis on which to differ. Similarity without difference melts into sameness. Similarity enables communication, difference gives us something to communicate about (Arendt, 1958).

### 1.5. The value of difference

There are elements of connection and disconnection in any research relationship. For myself, others are often curious as to why I have chosen Brixton as my field of study. For the most part this question comes from outsiders to Brixton. For example, a senior lecturer at the London School of Economics and Political Science suggested that I ask a black researcher to carry out the inter-views on my behalf. The assumption that my skin-colour would *inhibit* discussion with Brixtonites rests on a positivistic obsession with ‘interviewer effects’ (Orne, 1962) and a social representation of Brixton as black.

As Farr (1981) has noted in a perceptive article on the social psychology of the interview people respond to the presence, the comments and the reactions of others. The interview is, or should be, the meeting of 'views' or perspectives on certain topics (Kvale, 1996). The use of a hyphen highlights this point (Farr, 1981). My skin-colour has an effect on others: this is obvious. People label me as white and will make certain attributions from this. If I were black they would make different attributions. We know this from Rosenthal's (1966) study of researcher effects. This is not only a problem of methodology: it is part of our social psychology. Heider's (1958) work on the perception of people as a particular class of object highlights how we use social knowledge to make sense of both material and social objects. Patterns of attribution are the patterns of culture (Hewstone and Augoustinos, 1998).

Dealing with difference is a crucial part of the social psychology of life in Brixton. How others perceive me, how they react to me, and how far they trust me discloses the interconnections between social representation and identity. If I were to study a group very similar to myself, I would be less aware, I believe, of the potential gap between representation and identity and its consequences. Distance and even conflict between researcher and researched highlight aspects of identity construction which are otherwise less apparent. This became very clear to me in a confrontational focus group in the course on my study on the 1995 Brixton 'riot'. While this incident was personally upsetting, I may have learned more, here, about divergence in perspectives and its consequences for many who live in or near Brixton than in more amicable interviews (see Appendix III for a discussion of this).

The fact that I am a white, middle-class academic does position me to some extent as an outsider. My upbringing and experience are different to most of those who live in Brixton; although I am no stranger to differences in cultural heritage and skin-colour, having grown up in the multicultural societies of Fiji, Papua New Guinea and South Africa. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) "how people respond to the presence of the researcher may be as informative as how they react to other situations" (p.18). In my research in schools I exploited my differences from the children. I stressed to them that they had a wealth of information, were 'experts' on life in the area and had

much to teach me. I found, as have others researching adolescents, that this reversal of roles -

... can both be empowering and illuminating because one can reflect on and speak about one's life in ways not often available. When individuals are members of groups that have been stereotyped and devalued by the larger culture, and whose perspectives have been ignored, ... the promise of this approach is all the more apparent. (Miller and Glassner, 1997, pp.105-6).

Most children in the study responded enthusiastically and responsibly to this opportunity. They were keen to provide me with extensive information and to ensure that their own version of Brixton was heard. In making my differences salient, I enabled children to emphasise their difference, their own experiences and their own perspectives. There were instances, for example, when they gave detailed descriptions of experiences I, as a white adult, would not have. While difference needs to be made explicit in research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983), I hope that the empirical material which I present in the thesis demonstrates that difference not only is necessary but that it can be a valuable resource in doing research.

## 2. The Theory of Methods

As Heider (1958) suggested over 40 years ago, the social psychologist should be concerned with how people make sense of their everyday worlds; he called this 'common-sense psychology'. Ethnography "bears a close resemblance to the routine ways in which people make sense of the world in everyday life" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.2). As such it seems surprising that social psychologists have not produced more ethnographies (Farr, 1999). It must be said, however, that some of our classic studies fall under the description of ethnography. LaPiere's (1934) participant-observation of attitudes towards the Chinese in America, Festinger's (1956) covert infiltration of a religious cult, the Sherifs' (1962) studies of intergroup relations on a summer camp, Rosenhan's (1973) participant study in mental institutions, and Jodelet's (1991) longitudinal study of madness in a village community, are but a few. From my own university we can add to this list: an ethnography of funerals (Bradbury, 1999), of an ecological disaster (Gervais, 1997), and the social construction of a terrorist (Haroun, 1997), for example.

Ethnographic methods have much to offer a study of social representations, as Jodelet's (1991) work clearly demonstrates. In ethnography, concern "is no longer with social facts but with the factual character of social facts" (Silverman, 1985, p.165). This is my concern: the factual character of community. My interest is the everyday meaning given to community: how does community appear in the day-to-day? What importance do people give it?

### 2.1. Researching community

The level of analysis is the collective nature of the social construction of community. While community research is characterised by the "recognition that there are many useful alternative routes to the exploration of community phenomena" (Glidewell, 1985, p.v), too often research into community identity suffers from a "restrictive emphasis on individual level psychological variables" (Puddifoot, 1995, p.357). It is important to ensure that my chosen methods access collective, rather than individual, understandings of community. Hence, I have utilised the ethnographic methods of participant-observation, semi-structured inter-views, focus groups and content analysis as, I believe, they are better equipped to penetrate the intersubjective construction of social reality than are more quantitative methods.

What is fascinating about Brixton is that it exemplifies the conditions of late modernity in particularly vivid ways. In a local-global age, it is not easy to demarcate the boundaries of communities. "Since community boundaries, now more symbolic, more 'mental' than physical and geographical, are unreadable, they are harder to breach. You cannot drive over a bridge across a river which you cannot see" (Cohen, 1995, p.37). This is not to romanticise old, traditional rural communities; it is to make the point that globalisation, intensive urbanisation and a compressing of space-time mean that contemporary communities are less bound by physical borders (Luke, 1996). Many of today's communities merge into each other, and membership is more a matter of symbolic inclusion/exclusion than of an address (Cohen, 1995).

This makes the job of the community researcher even more difficult. The object of their study is not solid or fixed; it is performed, co-constructed, and contested. Put simply,

community is difficult to pin down. “Is community identity something that is actually measurable?” Puddifoot has asked (1995, p.359). I would suggest that a useful way of accessing community identities is, first, to research social representations of the community. As I explained in the previous chapter, we use social representations to negotiate identities. Therefore, a study of the social representations of a particular community should reveal the nature of the community identities which gain support from these representations. It is not a matter of unveiling the essence of a community, or discovering it as the natural scientist ‘discovers’ a new plant or mineral. Rather, the community researcher should, in my opinion, explore how people ‘live’ community; that is how collectively they establish and challenge the meaning given to the communities they claim or reject. Just as Baumann (1996) observed of culture, community “exists only insofar as it is performed” (p.11). I seek to problematise essentialist notions of the community as ‘a thing’ that is stable, uniform and identifiable. “Communities are never static” as Crow and Allan recognise (1994, p.185). Therefore the construction of community must be researched as a process that is ongoing and contestable (Young, 1990).

A community is not simply something or somewhere which exists as the stage *where* we interact, build identities, and struggle over conflicting interests. It is *what* we build through these interactions, *what* emerges through the construction of identities, and often *what* is the cause or product of conflicting interests. Hence, the community researcher not only has to observe how community becomes meaningful in a given setting, he also has to discover how people ‘do’ community (Silverstone, 1999b). He needs, that is, to engage in participant-observation of the community.

## 2.2. Participating and observing

Understanding a community necessitates immersing oneself within it, viewing it at different times and from different positions, both literally and figuratively. In order to develop an understanding of my research community, therefore, I ‘observed’ and ‘participated’ in life in Brixton. As an ‘observer-as-participant’ (Rose, 1982), I studied the community in both public and private spaces (homes, shops, pubs, the tube station, schools, police cars, youth centres, council offices, the streets and buses) and at different



times (typical weekdays, quiet Sunday afternoons, noisy Friday nights, and busy Saturday markets). As someone interested in Brixton, I have participated in community-organised demonstrations, have visited community centres, galleries and the community web-site, and continue to enjoy the wide variety of music and food on offer. "All social research takes the form of participant observation: it involves participating in the social world, in whatever role, and reflecting on the products of that participation" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.17). No social researcher can avoid influencing those they study. As such all researchers are participants in all methods of social research. Even the experimental psychologist shifts the dynamics of the research setting as he is participant as much as observer (Farr, 1978).

I see participant-observation as a generic methodology which provides the backdrop to this research. My knowledge of the community and those who comprise it stems as much from journeys through Brixton, interactions in Brixton market and conversations about Brixton, as it does from recorded inter-views and focus groups. It is a misfortune that I have not kept a more systematic diary of encounters in Brixton. Over the past four years my understanding of the area has deepened and a personal account of this development would contribute an additional source of data to this study.

The dialectics of participant-observation have influenced my choice of other research methods. Accessing what a community means for its inhabitants necessitates the analysis of both perspectives: participant and observer. Initially I imagined that participants in the everyday life of Brixton, as insiders, would have a different knowledge and experience of the community from observers. Observers of Brixton, as outsiders, would construct an alternative version of Brixton. Early on in this study I planned to probe insider perspectives on Brixton through one-to-one inter-views and focus groups. Outsider perspectives would be studied through a content analysis of media representations of Brixton. As my concern is to uncover and demonstrate the different social representations of a particular social object - Brixton, triangulation of methods is highly appropriate, as Flick (1992) recommends. Through talk about Brixton I hoped to access participants' representations of Brixton; through image I hoped to access observers' representations of Brixton.

The social psychology of attributions and impressions has guided my methodology. Heider (1958), unlike Jones and Nisbett (1972), recognised that the actor, or the participant, is aware of the perspective of the other, or the observer (Farr and Anderson, 1983). This means that perspectives are relational. Participants know that observers may form particular impressions on the basis of their expressive performances (Goffman, 1971) as there are cultural patterns to attribution (Ichhiesier, 1949). Thus, people living in the area of Brixton are, on the one hand, participants in that locality and, on the other, also observers of the same locality. “Everyone is a participant observer” assert Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p.125). The children in this study, for example, could switch quite happily from the perspective of an outsider to that of an insider. All social actors are aware that they are objects in the social world of the other and from this knowledge self-consciousness emerges (Mead, 1934).

In order to uncover the social meaning given to a community, the researcher has to consider the perspective of the insider, the perspective of the outsider, and the meeting point between these perspectives. From this understanding I have tackled the research question from three angles. Focus groups and inter-views with staff and children in Brixton’s schools uncovered insiders’ representations of their claimed communities. A study of images of Brixton in a documentary revealed outsiders’ representations of Brixton. Finally I analysed the overlap between insiders’ and outsiders’ representations of Brixton through a comprehensive examination of all collected material.

### 2.3. Triangulation and social representations

There is, Farr (1993) tells us, “no single road, in terms of methods of research, to the study of social representations” (p.23). Because social representations pervade all arenas of social life, the social researcher has a wide choice of contexts and methods of research. Studies of social representations can include everyday talk (Bradbury, 1999), narratives (Jovchelovitch, 1995b), scientific discourse (Herzlich, 1973), word association (Moodie *et al*, 1997), media images (de Rosa, 1998), survey data (Bauer, 1996), historical documents (Jodelet, 1991), institutional practices (Iverson, 1998), and drawings (de Rosa, 1987), to cite but a few examples. Social representations can be studied in the making (Gervais, 1997), as well as retrospectively (Bauer and Gaskell,

1999). Some researchers have preferred to analyse the representations at a particular time and in a particular context in producing a case study (e.g. Jodelet, 1991), while others seek to compare social representations across different groups or cultures (e.g. Moscovici, 1961). As with all research decisions, the social representationist should consider the appropriateness of the method used to his subject of study and to the particular research question in hand (Duveen and Lloyd, 1993).

The sensitivity of social representations to both time and context makes the combined use of methods, that is triangulation, peculiarly appropriate (Flick, 1998). Analysing social representations in different media (image, discourse, and practice, in this study), using different methods (here, participant-observation, inter-views, focus groups and content analysis) allows for a deeper understanding of the structure and dynamics of a representation. Abric's (1993) distinction between the core and the periphery of a representation enables research into both the stability and the reactivity of this social psychological phenomenon.

The aim of my research is to uncover the different meanings given to a particular social object: Brixton. Methodological triangulation relates methods in a complementary fashion so as to add depth and breadth to our understanding of the heterogeneous meanings that are constructed around social objects (Gervais, 1997). This allows for a thorough examination of the different forms of the same representation and of competing representations, through the use of different methods. As a generic methodology, it offers a way "for mutual evaluation of our analyses, ... without artificial objectification of the subject under study" (Flick, 1992, p.194). As it involves the "process of playing off each method against the other so as to maximise the validity of field efforts" (Denzin, 1978, p.304), triangulation makes our conclusions more credible.

Triangulation does not search for 'objective reality': "one might get a fuller picture, but not a more 'objective' one" (Fielding and Fielding, 1986, p.33). While it is true that "objective reality will never be captured" (Flick, 1992, p.180), we do need a way of accessing the subjectivity involved in research, and so of negotiating an intersubjectively agree-able account. Such an account "is neither subjective nor

objective knowledge. It is knowledge based on interaction between the knowing subject and the object of its knowledge” (Marková, 1982, pp.111-2).

Different methods are used to gain access to multiple versions of socially constructed reality (Gervais, 1997). These different versions support different subjectivities. From these subjective versions we can derive a co-constructed account of our subject of study. This is as close as we can get to objectivity (Tolman, 1994). Triangulation affords the opportunity of examining subjectivity using different methods of research, and so offers us the possibility of building an intersubjective account.

#### 2.4. Representations in different media

Because “our data are inevitably products of the research process” (Morley, 1996, p.320), social research design should ideally include a mix of reactive and non-reactive forms of data. It is for this reason that content analysis, both textual and graphic, is often included in social representational research. “The non-reactive nature of these data helps ensure that the social representations which emerge from the analysis do not change by virtue of being investigated” (Farr, 1993, p.25). There are many ways in which a social representation may be expressed (in talk, text, image, practice and music). The different possible contexts for analysis will reveal different dimensions of the representation (cognitive, intersubjective, and institutional). A thorough research project should aim at a well-considered mix of methods to uncover the interconnections between form and function (Bauer and Gaskell, 1999). In my research, I have sought to develop a broad analysis of social representations of Brixton from different viewpoints (within the school, on the streets, within the media, in the context of a riot and in insider-outsider encounters) through different media (talk, text, image and practice). Thus, the scope of the thesis is wide, dealing with issues from self-consciousness and subjectivity to dominant discourses on Brixton and the on-line communication about Brixton.

Some of these issues are more central to the research question in hand, however. The main concern in my project is the social construction of community through the twin processes of identity construction and social re-presentation. Obviously, issues that relate directly to this question deserve more attention than others. For this reason, the

study of the subjective and intersubjective dimensions to social re-presentations of Brixton, analysed through the talk of inter-views and focus groups, is given priority. My analysis of this central study will then be ‘put to the test’, so to speak, in the subsequent analysis of a television documentary. This media study will focus on the visual mode of representations in its analysis of images and social representations. The analysis of the overlap between insiders’ and outsiders’ perspectives explores how representations emerge in social practices as well as in image, text and talk. Together these three approaches to the research examine the same social representations in different modes and different settings using different methods.

### 3. Different Perspectives

Community researchers need to “understand ‘community’ by seeking to capture members’ experience of it. Instead of asking, ‘What does it look like to us? What are its theoretical implications?’ we ask, ‘What does it appear to mean to its members?’” (Cohen, 1995, p. 20). We also need to ask ‘What does it mean to outsiders? And what happens when these different meanings conflict? Who, then, has the authority to define community? How can insiders resist outsiders’ representations?’

These are the central questions of my study. In order to examine the *social psychology* of the community, we must embed our research within the lived experience of community. If the dialectic of social re-presentation and identity is to be highlighted, the experiences of those within the community are to be privileged. Insiders’ constructions of identity rest on social representations of Brixton, while these representations are less significant for outsiders. Therefore outsiders’ identities are not central to this research. As outsiders’ representations impact insiders’ representations and identities, these, in contrast, require in-depth analysis.

Insiders know both sides of the dialectic of identity and representation. For this reason the bulk of the research centres on the views of those who live in the Brixton area. I carried out an extensive and in-depth study of the views of insiders, through semi-structured inter-views, focus groups and follow-up discussions. A detailed analysis of this material not only revealed the social representations and identities salient in

Brixton, it also shed light on how insiders consider others perceive them. That is, in an indirect way, I also learnt much about outsiders' representations of Brixton from talking to insiders.

### 3.1. Adolescents as experts

My concern with identity and the relationship between internal and external community representations led me to choose adolescents as my primary informants. From my past experience as a schoolteacher I had an intuition that teenagers would be valuable participants. The work of Gerard Duveen (1994, forthcoming; and with Barbara Lloyd 1986, 1990, 1993) illustrates the depth of knowledge and experience that children of any age have in relation to social representations. As he asserts:

Examining the processes through which children are incorporated into the thinking structures of their community and thereby take their place as competent and functioning participants presents a field of enquiry which can be the source of both productive questions and constructive contributions to the theory of social representations. (Duveen, 1994, p.261, author's translation).

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 his conflicting identities (Erikson, 1968). It is at this time that "the problematic relationship between how we see ourselves and how others see us, becomes a central concern" (Jenkins, 1996, p.67). Thus adolescents provide a rich source of material in the study of responses to threatened identities, as others have found (e.g. Weinreich, 1983).

Adolescents spend a lot of time on the streets, travelling through Brixton on their way to school, hanging out with their friends, and, perhaps for the first time, venturing outside the area without the watchful eye of their parents and teachers. In these public spaces and on the borders of the community, insider and outsider perspectives are called into question. This means that adolescents begin to develop not only their own ideas about, and relationship to, Brixton, but they also become experts in understanding how others

perceive Brixton. For children who live in stigmatised areas and therefore have to come to terms with the negative representations which others have of them, the need to establish a community identity is all the more compelling. Thus, like other community researchers, I found adolescents to be “ideal subjects”, given their current preoccupation with issues of identity and social representations of where they live (e.g. Gillespie, 1995). As “representation constitutes a crucial part of learning” (Ryan, 1999, p. 10), I realised that schools would be a useful forum for the study of dominant representations of the community and the negotiation of a community identity. Like Ryan’s (1999) Canadian study of *Race and Ethnicity in Multi-Ethnic Schools*, schools proved to be a rich context in the study of representation and identity.

### 3.2. Inter-viewing school ‘gatekeepers’

In order to gain access to children, I contacted and arranged semi-structured inter-views with the deputy-heads in all three secondary schools in the Brixton area. These schools, referred to as school1, school2 and school3, were broadly similar: they attracted students from the same area and had a diverse, multicultural staff and student body. School1 had the best record in terms of league tables, examination results and success in extra-curricula activities (with their choir singing in such prestigious venues as St Paul’s Cathedral and the Royal Albert Hall). School3 faced the challenges of a turbulent past, poor facilities and a high percentage of ‘special needs’ students. School2 fell somewhere between these two, producing good examination results despite the challenges of meeting the diverse needs of a large school population.

The principals of these schools suggested I work with their deputies because, as well as having considerable knowledge of their students through teaching, and the authority to grant me access, they also had the time to be inter-viewed. One of the deputy heads in the study, who showed tremendous dedication to the well-being of her students, was promoted to the most senior position in her school in the course of my research. To avoid unnecessary wordiness and to preserve the anonymity of all three women, I refer to them as ‘school-heads’ or teachers, abbreviating this to ‘SH’. I distinguish between SH1, SH2 and SH3 who all teach and manage school affairs at school1, school2 or school3 respectively.

An important purpose of the hour-long inter-views was to get permission to run focus groups with students. All school-heads were agreeable and extremely helpful. I also used these inter-views as a way of testing out ideas and questions which I would later ask the children. The inter-views proved highly illuminating. Not only did they give me essential information about the children in the school and the cultural composition of the school; they also revealed the different cultures of the schools themselves. The interview guide below lists the topics covered. As I wanted to see how far Brixton would arise as a special issue in its own right, I did not choose it as a central topic. All inter-views were recorded, transcribed and analysed with the computer package *Nud\*ist* (as discussed in Chapter Five and Appendix I).<sup>1</sup>

### One-to-one interview guide (school-heads)

#### **1. Information about the school**

Ethnic make-up of the school?

History of the school - how has ethnic make-up changed over years?

Number of students from Brixton?

#### **2. Experiences of students**

How important is ethnicity within the school?

Advantages and disadvantages compared to schools in other areas?

Are there age differences with regard to the experience of cultural identity?

Different for children from Brixton?

#### **3. Identity**

What is the relationship between students' knowledge about different cultures and their identities?

Do they become more British, or English, as they grow up?

Do students consider themselves 'from Brixton'?

#### **4. Problems**

Is there racism or hostility between different groups in the school?

Are there problems in living in a multicultural area?

Solutions to problems?

A comparison of the inter-views exposed considerable differences in how much school time and resources were given to issues of cultural identity and history, understanding prejudice and building self-esteem. While, for the most part, this information supplements the analysis of the focus groups, an examination of the one-to-one inter-views reveals important across-school differences in the children's management of

<sup>1</sup> All inter-view transcripts are available on request.



stigmatising social representations. As I discuss in Chapter Eight, these differences have a significant impact on the students' developing self-identity and self-esteem.

### 3.3. Focusing on community

Focus groups are popular amongst many community researchers. Plaut *et al* (1993), for example, proclaimed that “almost all the elements of the community could be accessed in the safe familiar context of their own turf, relations, and organisations through focus groups” (p.217). They provide a way of moving beyond an “essentially individualistic framework” and examining the intersubjective level of community identities and representations (Puddifoot, 1995, p.364). Indeed, they were the single most fruitful method in my study.

As well as being useful for community research, they are an extremely efficient way both of accessing social representations (Farr, 1996) and of studying “people who have historically had limited power and influence” (Morgan and Krueger, 1993, p.15). The researcher can set up problems for discussion without imposing their social representations (Schlesinger, 1992). The support of others with similar experiences, particularly when they are known and respected, may bolster the self-confidence of those not often heard. Focus groups distribute the responsibility of providing the moderator with information. Some argue that this may encourage a ‘false consensus’ (van Avermaet, 1988; Turner, 1990), extreme views (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996), or undue influence from dominant individuals (Krueger, 1994).

However, with careful planning and selecting of participants, and subtle moderating, they can provide invaluable insights, for the social psychologist in particular. Group dynamics, false consensus, and minority influence should not be methodological problems for us. They are the domain of our discipline. Research techniques which may bring them to the fore allow further examination in relation to what we are investigating (Blumer, 1986). In Chapter Five I do just this, in examining how group composition affects the dynamics of the inter-view, how disagreement and tension are managed, and how participants shift and contradict their original positions.

In selecting participants in focus groups, there are two main considerations: difference and similarity. A current trend in focus group research is to emphasise across-group differences and within group similarity. Morgan (1988) suggests that similar backgrounds and views within the group reduces awkwardness, artificiality and formality. The segmentation of groups should be done in an informed way that (a) provides different versions of the subject of study from different perspectives, and (b) enables the participants to share common knowledge and negotiate agreed opinions from the same perspective.

The selection of ‘break characteristics’, that is the differences between groups, must stem from the field and not be imposed without demonstrable reasoning (Knodel, 1993). Jovchelovitch’s (1995b) study on social representations and public life is a good example. It contained groups of professionals, students, taxi-drivers, policemen, manual workers and children. These groups have distinctly different experiences of the public sphere as they are positioned differently within it and have varying degrees of access to it and control over it. The composition of these groups, therefore, both reflects and informs the researcher’s unfolding understanding of the public sphere. Without this consideration, the researcher may fall into the trap of reifying social categories (Lloyd and Duveen, 1992).

As Bauer and Gaskell (1999) recognise, social scientists “need heuristics, to determine relevant groups for particular issues, in order to avoid following blindly the default of much social research to segment statistically according to income, age and sex”. If little is known about the population and their relationship to what is under investigation, divisions should be minimised. In this study, I wanted a selection of mixed friendship groups of different ages, genders, ethnicities, skin-colours and address in the community. For unavoidable practical reasons, it was necessary to split groups on the basis of gender (as only one school is co-educational) and school year (as this meant that inter-views could be slotted into the school timetable). As I was cautious of this artificial division from the outset, I believe that I was biased in favour of *not* reifying age or gender. In order to include at least one younger and one older group from each school, and at least two groups of both genders, I carried out seven focus groups, each

with between five and eight participants (see Appendix I for further information). In total, there were 44 participants in the focus groups as a whole. The discussions lasted between 50 and 80 minutes, and were all conducted on school premises.

Within each group, I was fortunate to have a range of nationalities, skin-colours<sup>2</sup> and addresses in the community. My particular research question is: What meaning does Brixton have for those who live there? I did not know in advance that skin-colour, address, or gender would influence the experience of living in the area. By creating diverse groups, differences became salient.

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 I discovered, conflict and differences of opinion forced students to clarify their position, expose their attachment to particular representations, and admit weaknesses in their own position. My insistence that groups were friends made it possible for controversial, and sometimes personally upsetting, topics to be discussed freely. I believe that the richness of the discussions is testimony to this.

One could, however, also argue that friendship may produce the opposite effect: the fact that their relationships are ongoing may inhibit discussion of personal and sensitive issues. In order to monitor the effects of friendship, I recorded my impression of the group dynamics at play, the apparent relationship of each participant to the rest of the group (tense, tolerant or, for the most part, friendly), and overall group identification with Brixton. The differences and similarities in and across focus groups are summarised in Appendix I. Only on one occasion did I feel that a child was inhibited principally by the presence of the others in the group. When this focus group ended I

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<sup>2</sup> 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 children and teachers in this study showed no such anxiety and used the terms positively. As I began to understand the importance of appearance and gaze in Brixton, I realised that ethnic and racial labels are often pseudonyms for colour. Skin-colour, not ethnicity or heritage, is often the mark of difference. Hence, I examine the differences and similarities in how children of different skin-colours experience Brixton.

asked this child, Salote, to take me back to the main entrance of the school. Subtly, I hope, I created a less intimidating opportunity to discover more about her. As we crossed the school grounds, she explained that she and her mother would not portray Brixton as positively as had her classmates. She told me stories of neighbourhood rows, burglaries and violent attacks that she and her family had experienced. If I had been less concerned with group dynamics, I may have missed this revealing information. It is up to the skill of the moderator to pick up on such problems and find ways of countering these pressures.

The moderator also has to ensure that differences of opinion are explored without encouraging hostility or reticence. In most of the groups, there were moments when the discussion became heated. For example, three black insiders challenge the views of Samia, a Muslim girl who does not live in Brixton. Here is an example:

Samia: I'm not being racist or nothing, it's just that that is the way I feel. I don't feel that it's the safest place around.

Aimee: When you've been there has anything ever happened to you to make you make you –

Samia: Nothing has ever happened to me, but I have seen things like, ok, I'm not saying that there is not other drunk people in other places, but I have seen a lot of drunk people there, besides, especially near the tube station. And at night it is a bit scary. And I don't want to, you know, I don't want to be in that situation or anything like that.

Tara: So what are you saying? Have you been there lots of times?

Samia: Yeah, I go to Brixton lots of times.

It is at moments like this that the relationships between social representation and identity emerge as people's differing versions of the world, and hence their identities are challenged. The use of social representations in the negotiation and defence of identity, therefore, becomes particularly apparent in the focus group.

A focus group guide served more as a mental reminder of topics I wanted to cover rather than as a systematic checklist. From this, one can see that I planned to tackle representations of Brixton both from the perspective 'experienced from the inside' and the perspective 'perceived from the outside', as well as looking for the consequences of

these representations for identity. These topics emerged naturally but in a fairly haphazard order. As the research developed, I learnt that some topics would always appear spontaneously, such as media representations of Brixton, the Brixton 'riots', and community relations with the police. Given the importance these had in the co-construction of community identities, the inclusion of *Reflections on earlier research: the 1995 Brixton 'Riot'* (Appendix III) is all the more necessary.

## Group interview guide

### **1. Personal information**

'I am' task

When people ask you where you are from, what do you say?

### **2. Brixton (from the inside)**

What is Brixton like? / How would you describe Brixton?

What are people from Brixton like?

Is Brixton a community?

Has Brixton changed over time?

Is there conflict between different groups in Brixton?

### **3. Brixton (from the outside)**

How do people from outside view Brixton? (Reputation)

Some people think that it is a violent and criminal place. Do you agree?

Some people think that places like Brixton are not British. Do you agree?

### **4. You and Brixton**

Do you like living in Brixton?

Will you remain in Brixton?

Do you feel at home in Brixton?

What do you share with people from Brixton?

Do you feel attached to Brixton? / Has it made you who you are?

### **5. Difficulties**

Are there problems that you have to face because you live in Brixton?

Do you feel that people in Brixton are disadvantaged in any way?

What prejudices do you/they face?

### **6. Personal**

Do you feel British (or ....., or both)?

What could other people learn from Brixton?

The different versions of Brixton were discussed openly, sometimes with anger and emotion, sometimes with commendable respect for differences of opinion. Many evidently enjoyed the experience; one girl even burst into tears when I said that I already had enough participants. Stories and jokes about life in Brixton, anger over Brixton's

negative reputation, fear of the area, and pride in the community were all eagerly offered. Throughout the project, the maturity and confidence of the children impressed me. Most students seemed genuinely interested in the discussions, in asking each other to develop arguments, to listen to each other and to collaborate stories, as I hope extracts illustrate. This is not meant simply as a tribute to their involvement. Dialectics of difference/identity pervade their everyday experience, and, as such, these children may be uncommonly adept in taking the perspective of the other and dealing with difference.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.4. 'Who am I?'

I began each focus group with a short 'I am' task. Rather than the 'Twenty Statements Test' developed by Kuhn and Hickman (1956), I gave a simplified twelve statements test. Most completed this easily, although some of the children only managed 6 or 8 statements. This exercise provided me with useful information about how they spontaneously identified. Colour, nationality and abilities were common adjectives given.

Below are four examples.

WHO AM I?	
I am	a girl
I am	a star
I am	tall
I am	1.57m tall
I am	black
I am	Nice
I am	young
I am	good at football
I am	Welsh
I am	born in England
I am	a St. Martin's school girl
I am	loved

WHO AM I?	
I am	small
I am	Welsh
I am	white (not coloured)
I am	thicken
I am	quite sporty
I am	sensitive
I am	young
I am	singing
I am	good at music
I am	well behaved
I am	helpful
I am	a christian - Salvation Army

<sup>3</sup> All transcripts are available on request.

WHO AM I?	
I am	large / fat
I am	funny
I am	kind
I am	considerate
I am	smart
I am	Black
I am	responsible
I am	chatty
I am	talkative
I am	respectful
I am	argumentative
I am	Brixton Nigerian

WHO AM I?	
I am	Bengali
I am	Small
I am	12 years old
I am	friendly
I am	quite sporty
I am	from Bangladesh
I am	13 years
I am	quite white and brown
I am	always behaving myself at all time
I am	a student
I am	a chacholic
I am	eg. 13 on March 5 <sup>th</sup>

This 'I am' exercise allowed me to analyse the data on the basis of different identifications. Throughout the thesis, I use these self-descriptions to distinguish between participants. 'Black British', 'mixed', 'proud', for example, are adjectives the children gave themselves and so are useful in dissecting the relationship between social re-presentation and identity. Appendix I gives the full list of personal characteristics, including age, nationality, address, skin-colour, dominance in the group and personal identification with Brixton, as well as shared characteristics of their focus group, including year group, gender, school, overall group identification with Brixton and the apparent relationship of each participant to the rest of the group (tense, tolerant or friendly). As will become apparent, this information has been extremely useful in explaining patterns and contradictions found in the analysis of the material gathered from both teachers and students.

### 3.5. Analysing media representations

Not only did the teachers and students discuss how they experienced life in Brixton but they also told me of how others perceived the area. They gave me, that is, outsiders' representations of Brixton, from their own perspective. In particular, they focused on how the media represent Brixton. Without a separate study of these representations, "without evidence" media analysts would say, "everything is merely speculation" (Lewis, 1994, p. 20). Hence, the analysis of the co-construction of identity in Brixton would be incomplete without an account of representations of Brixton found in the media.

As for researchers of other communities, the focus on television emerged out of the ethnography itself. Gillespie (1995), for example, in her illuminating study of Southall in West London, highlighted the importance that television news, soap operas and film had in the construction and reconstruction of identity for those in her study. The question of the role of the media in the construction of identity is a vast field in its own right, and one that could not possibly be covered in a single chapter of a PhD thesis. As will become obvious, this literature has been extremely valuable in my examination of the role of the media in the construction of the identities of those living in the Brixton area, particularly the work of Hall (1973/1980, 1997), Lewis (1994), Morley (1992) and Thompson (1995).

Such an ambitious task could be undertaken in a variety of ways. At the broadest level one could embark on a content analysis of all media publications that refer to Brixton over an extensive time-scale. One could inter-view outsiders on media representations of Brixton. One could even inter-view on how those living in Brixton believe outsiders construct the community. One could select a specifically-chosen television programme on Brixton and analyse it in depth. To varying degrees, all of these options have guided my understanding of outsiders' perceptions of Brixton.

My interest in Brixton began four years ago with a study of the so-called 'riot' in December 1995 (see Appendix III). Since then I have followed media reportage on Brixton. This mainly involved news items, but also included entertainment guides (e.g. *Time Out*, March 24 – March 31 1999). Most recently, it led to an intensive study of the paper and electronic media coverage of the 'Brixton bomb' over the three week period in which this event was prevalent in the news (17 April to 9 May). In addition, outsiders' views on Brixton comprise part of my ongoing participant-observation of representations of the area, though outsiders themselves have not been included in one-to-one inter-views since my study of the recent 'riot' was completed in 1996. Rather, conversations with outsiders about my research, as well as conversations overheard, have fed into my deepening understanding of external discourses on Brixton. The most relevant part of the media study, a documentary on Brixton, was selected and analysed more systematically.



In any kind of analysis it is important to be clear about why one is doing it as much as how it is done (Lewis, 1994). The purpose of my analysis is very specific: to examine media representations of Brixton from the perspective of those who live in Brixton. I achieve this by comparing insiders' views of media representations of Brixton with the salient images and narratives of Brixton in a documentary on teenagers from the area. Having first completed the analysis of focus groups and inter-views, I began the media analysis from the perspective of people living in Brixton. Having this fresh in my mind, so to speak, meant that insiders' views enriched my own interpretation of Brixton on television. Acknowledging that my perspective as researcher is inevitably partial, I sought to incorporate the perspective of others as far as possible. This decision was informed by Morley's (1996) insights into media research, such as this one:

Research is thus, ... always a matter of interpreting, indeed constructing, reality from a particular position, rather than a positivist enterprise seeking a 'correct' scientific perspective that will finally allow us to achieve the utopian dream of a world completely known in the form of indisputable facts. (p.320).

"The ethnographer reads the world, as she reads mediated messages, through the eyes of her informants themselves" (Gillespie, 1995, p.1). Rather than pretend this could be otherwise, I have exploited this knowledge and made it explicit. In examining images and narratives through the eyes of those in my study, I was able to ascertain the degree of 'fit' between their interpretations, alternative interpretations and the programme. A programme, like a message, "is always capable of producing more than one meaning, or interpretation, and can never be reduced simply to one 'ultimate' or 'real' meaning" (Morley, 1992, p.83).

Insiders in Brixton had impressed upon me the power of the image in conveying messages about Brixton. Hence, the image became central to my study, despite discovering a lack of clear critical texts on the methodology behind image analysis. As others have found, "visual analysis is possibly the 'poor relation' in mass communication research" (Hansen *et al*, 1998, p.189). This explains why "critical inquiries into visual representation tend to follow the model of the study of texts and documents" (Nederveen Pieterse, 1991, p.193). Different researchers of images advocate methods developed both in narrative research (e.g. Hansen *et al*, 1998) and in studies on social representations (e.g. Jahoda, 1999) as these connect image to wider

fields of meaning - social representations, narratives, discourses and ideologies. These inform my own study.

Selecting a documentary was not a difficult task: there has only been one recent series on television about lives in Brixton (*Electric Avenue*), and only one programme in the series directly related to those in my study (*Stacey and the Buff Bay Crew*). In fact, this programme could not have been more appropriate as it centred on a girl who went to school<sup>11</sup>. Both the series and the programme are described in detail in Chapter Seven. Before beginning the analysis I watched the series as a whole four times, and then re-watched *Stacey and the Buff Bay Crew* a further six times. Through analysis various social representations would emerge, and I wanted to ensure that I would retain the series and the programme as complete wholes in my mind. This accomplished, I began to deconstruct the web of images and narratives presented. For the analysis of the moving image Hansen *et al* (1998) maintain:

It is first of all necessary to halt its progress, to separate yourself from the apparent seamless and constant flow of images and story, and then to start to dismantle the individual component parts that make up the whole. (p. 132).

In order to deconstruct the documentary I produced transcripts of both the changing images and the developing narrative. Repeatedly I listened to the dialogue without the picture, and I watched the picture without the sound. The unfolding structure of the programme as a whole was compared with discrete sub-plots and character-developments. I examined symbolic associations in dominant meanings, binary oppositions, recurrent patterns, juxta-positioning and omissions, as well as in the technicalities of production in framing, camera angles, lighting, cutting, voice-overs, and background music (as recommended by Devereux, 1998; Hansen *et al*, 1998; and Morley, 1992). Following Morley (1994) I combined the vertical dimensions of media analysis (concerned with questions of power and history) with the horizontal (concerned with the integration of representations). In Chapter Seven I show how this enabled me to consider both the encoding and the decoding of the programme (Hall, 1973/1980).

### 3.6. Follow-up and feedback

The aim of the media study was to uncover outsiders' representations of Brixton through the eyes of those who live in that area. As I have just described, I used the material from focus groups and inter-views as a way of assessing the portrayal of Brixton on television. Perhaps this is rather unorthodox. The mixing of methods is challenging enough for many social scientists (Gervais, 1997); to use one source of data more-or-less as a coding frame for another may be more than some can tolerate. However, I would invite the reader to consider the reason in my method and test its value in the ensuing work.

To pretend that the knowledge I have gained in one context will not guide my developing understanding in another different, but directly related, context is naïve. Moreover, such pretence would clash with some of the central premises of any rigorously *social* psychology. Both Hegelian principles and the theory of social representations assert that social knowledge is continuously evolving in moving from one sphere of experience to another (Purkhardt, 1993). I am, like my informants, reactive in the social research setting (Farr, 1978). The experience of doing research does, and in my mind, should, inform and develop further research. As a social psychologist studying, among other things, the social self, I see this as far more than a problem of methodology. It is an artefact of interpersonal relationships and testimony to the intersubjective and dynamic nature of self (Crossley, 1996) and an example of how we use our past to interpret the present (Mead, 1934). Whether in the consensual or reified universes of knowledge (Moscovici, 1984), the scientist cannot escape his social nature.

This is not to say, however, that there is no possibility of questioning the researcher's findings. How do we know, for instance, that my interpretation of *Stacey and the Buff Bay Crew*, though informed by insiders' views on media representations of Brixton, would actually concur with their own conclusions after watching the programme? This was something that I tested after completing the media study. I returned to school1 and school3 (being the two schools most different from each other) on several occasions and discussed my findings with both school-heads and pupils that I had previously

interviewed. All of them had seen the programme except for SH2 who was pleased to receive a copy of the programme from me. These discussions confirmed that the representations uncovered in the early research remained salient and guided their interpretations of the programme. These ‘follow-up discussions’, as I have called them, were especially informative in school1. This was because the school was involved in the filming of the programme, SH1 had met the producers on various occasions and both she and the students were well acquainted with the principal character in the programme.

‘Follow-up discussions’ had two other important functions. Firstly I used them to organise the selection and actual taking of photographs to illustrate the thesis (presented above). Once again, the students’ eagerness to agree on images democratically, their thorough consideration of different possibilities, and their helpful manner all impressed me. These subsequent meetings with students, fifteen in total, and with SH1 and SH2 also enabled me to report back the main findings, concerns and questions that had developed in the research. This allowed me to ‘check’ my conclusions with others involved in the research in a form of “respondent validation” (Hammersley, 1993). I used the opportunity to push my analysis further, explore difficult problems raised in the analysis and test out my own understanding. Crucially, they showed participants in the study that I was still interested in their lives and still keen to engage with their points of view. All research should feedback into the field of study; when this informs the analysis it should be integrated into the thesis.

## In conclusion

This chapter has detailed how I have approached the subject of my research practically: it has answered the ‘how’ of the research. I have examined the methodological challenges that I encountered over the course of research, including subjectivity, validity, access, and selection. I have described my choice of methods and stressed the value of focus groups and inter-views in the study for social representations. This led on to a description of the media study and techniques for examining the moving image. Finally I addressed the benefits and importance of reporting back findings to the community of study.

Throughout this discussion I have stressed the social psychological nature of this research and the value of using our discipline to tackle what are often seen as methodological problems. Affirming my own position within a Hegelian paradigm and specifically within the theory of social representations means that, for me, the reactivity of social research is not an embarrassing failure of my methodology. It is an essence of our humanity. I hope that this chapter has demonstrated this. The next step, one may assume, should be a presentation of my analysis of this material.

This is not the case. The process of analysis is discussed in a later chapter (Chapter Five, *Analysing Different Perspectives*). Before we commence the analysis, however, we need to turn back to more theoretical questions. Data analysis is always directed by particular theories, whether one realises this and explains this or not (Rose, 1996). Without theory there would only be description. Crucially, the analyst needs a theory of the relationship between what is said and who said it. Without such a theory, I would not be able to connect the stories and images of Brixton revealed in focus groups, inter-views, television programmes, Internet communication and observed encounters. To provide a social psychological analysis of my material, I believe, I need a theory of the relationship between self-identity and representation. Hence, it is to this question we now turn.

## CHAPTER 4

### Identity in Whose Eyes?

#### 1. Social Identity Theories

- 1.1. Negotiating self-identity
- 1.2. Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory
- 1.3. Examining social groups

#### 2. Self-identity in Society

- 2.1. Threatened identities
- 2.2. A snapshot of identity
- 2.3. "Let's look at them funny!"

#### 3. The Intersubjective Self

- 3.1. The dialectics of self
- 3.2. Children's developing self-reflexivity
- 3.3. Building identity through social re-presentation
- 3.4. Temporal identities

#### 4. Identity and Community

- 4.1. Contested identities
- 4.2. Out of many – one community
- 4.3. Establishing borders
- 4.4. Diasporic identities

In order to understand the significance of social representations of Brixton and their consequence for the identities of those who live in the locality, I critically examine the dominant social psychological theories of identity - Social Identity Theory and its offshoot Self-Categorisation Theory (Tajfel, 1981a; Turner, 1987). I draw on the stories and experiences of those living in the Brixton area both to illustrate and to test theoretical claims. The theories of self-consciousness (Mead, 1934) and of social representations (Moscovici, 1984) are incorporated to remedy the weaknesses in the accounts provided by Social Identity Theory. These emphasise the self-conscious, intersubjective, and temporal nature of identity. Finally, I examine the contested and multiple nature of community identities. The notion of diasporic identities, drawn from Brah (1996), is developed to account for the negotiated and creative nature of identities in the late modern world (Hall, 1990).

## 1. Social Identity Theories

Social identity is continuously constructed and reshaped in its (often antipathetic) interaction with outsiders, strangers, foreigners, and aliens - the 'others'. You know who you are, only by knowing who you are not. (Cohen, 1994, p.1).

Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others (Festinger, 1954). The creating and maintaining of identity, i.e. identification, is a process of attributing and establishing commonality with others. 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). To be members of the social world, we have to know where we 'fit into' this world and into the networks of similarity and difference that make up the communities in which we live. In contemporary society, particularly in richly diverse areas such as Brixton, there are multiple possible identities to construct: ethnic, gendered, generational, class, religious, transnational. In comprehending this heterogeneity, we position ourselves within it. It is through the ambivalent process of understanding what is outside of ourselves, what constitutes alterity, that we come to understand our selves (Hall, 1991a). It is through 'assuming the role of the other', and so through an understanding of what we share with others, that we form a sense of uniqueness (Mead, 1934). Thus identity, or self, is built on these networks of difference and commonality (Rutherford, 1990).

Identity is "a process 'located' *in the core of the individual* and yet also *in the core of his communal culture*, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities" (Erikson, 1968, p.22, italics in the original). For the most part, this process of reconciling the identity of the individual and the identity of the culture is unconscious "except", as Erikson argues, "where inner conditions and outer circumstances combine to aggravate a painful, or elated, "identity-consciousness" (p.23). Living in a diverse area that is characterised by both prejudice and pride may well exacerbate this "identity-consciousness". As such, Brixton presents itself as an ideal place to study the dialectics of self-identity and representation.

### 1.1. Negotiating self-identity

While some theorists have used the terms ‘self’ and ‘identity’ interchangeably (e.g. Hall, 1991a; Breakwell, 1986), others have used them as distinct concepts. Duveen (1994), for example, has asserted that “an identity provides a means of organising experience which contributes towards the definition of self”. Here identity is seen as only a part of self; self is the combination of all identities (personal and social, ethnic, gendered, generational, and so forth). Other theorists see self-identity the other way around; identity being the composition of different selves (e.g. Cohen, 1994, p. 11). For example:

Identity ... is essentially a concept of synthesis. It represents the process by which the person seeks to integrate his various statuses and roles, as well as his diverse experiences, into a coherent image of self. (Epstein 1978, p.101).

Both distinctions are useful as they recognise the plural nature of self-identity. For the most part, I prefer to view self and identity as intertwined concepts. Too often the self-awareness of identity is forgotten (Giddens, 1991). Using identity and self in parallel has the benefit of focusing on both the self-consciousness of identity and the hybrid nature of self. As I shall show in this chapter, this allows us to examine (a) the dialectics between self and other, (b) the intersubjective nature of identities, and (c) the diasporic nature of modern identities.

Seeing self-identity as something that is born through interaction with others, and constantly reaffirmed and challenged by interpersonal relations, allows the question of community identities to arise. What has emerged in this study is that people in Brixton develop an understanding of the area and of their relationship to it through the eyes of others. Children and adults alike have to negotiate the representations that others have of them. That is, in order to develop a relatively coherent community identity, people recognise and reflect on others’ social representations of their claimed communities.

The combined use of self and of identity should not lead to a unitary notion of identity. We can still talk about ‘identity’ and incorporate its heterogeneous nature (Hall, 1990). To discuss ‘multiple identities’ implies that individuals hold disparate identities. Rather, we need to describe the different aspects of identities, the different perspectives on our



own identities. Gender, ethnic and religious identities should not be sub-divided and analysed separately. Gender, for example, is a constant theme, a lens that pervades my understanding of all interactions, and my reactions within them (Bem, 1993). As Oyerman and Markus (1998) have recognised, “ethnicity-based social representations are interwoven with gender-based social representations, creating a unique social space which cannot be neatly separated into ‘ethnic’ and ‘gender’ component parts” (p.122; see also Edley and Wetherell, 1995). Gender both affirms and challenges ethnicity, generation, religious affiliation, and so on. The same can be said of all aspects of identity.

While the focus of this study is community identities, other identifications play a part in constructing what it means to be from Brixton. The experience of being from Brixton is very different for young, black boys than it is for older, Chinese girls, for example. Membership of this community gains significance through various other identities. To understand these differences is to understand something of the relationship between social representations of the community and constructing identities in relation to these representations.

Self, or identity, then, is not a given; it is collectively negotiated in interaction with others. Self emerges as individuals come to understand their social world and their relation to it (Farr, 1996). The emergence and development of identity involves the individual ‘turning back’ upon herself, to see herself as others see her. In order to integrate, to communicate, and to locate herself within a community, she has to understand how others perceive both her and the communities with which she is associated (Breakwell, 1986). This is the essence of mutual understanding in interpersonal relationships (Heider, 1958; Ichheiser, 1949). In order to establish a unique identity within a society, one has to see one’s self through the eyes of others. That is, one has to step outside oneself and see oneself as others would see you (Mead, 1934).

For those marginalised and stigmatised within any society the pressure to take the perspective of the other is all the more acute (Fanon, 1952; Goffman, 1968). For children in Brixton, ‘seeing oneself as others see you’ can be a painful experience. Social

representations of Brixton in wider society tend to marginalise and denigrate many from Brixton. As I demonstrate in Chapter Seven, Brixton is generally characterised as black, foreign, and criminal. These representations conflict with the more positive image that 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 insider and outsider perspectives can threaten both the self-knowledge and the self-esteem of community members. Therefore, in studying community, what it means and how it is experienced, we need a comprehensive theory of self-identity. In a social psychological study, the obvious place to begin is Social Identity Theory (SIT).

### 1.2. Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory

SIT seeks to explain the formation of social identity through self-other categorisations and comparisons (Tajfel, 1981a, 1982; Turner, 1978). The division of the social world into different categories “brings the world into sharper focus and creates a perceptual environment in which things are more black and white, less fuzzy and ambiguous” (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p.72). As a way of simplifying and comprehending the diversity of our various environments, we tend to segment and label it into distinct groups. Tajfel (1970), Tajfel and Wilkes (1963), and Bruner and Goodman (1947) have shown how we tend to exaggerate actual differences between groups and minimise the diversity within groups in both object perception (e.g. line length, coin size) and person perception (e.g. height, nationality). Hogg and Abrams (1988) describe how we draw on peripheral information in making distinctions and judging the degree of difference. They suggest, for example, that we may do this with regard to ‘having a sense of rhythm’ and ethnicity, and to displays of emotion and gender.

As we go on to see in Part II of this thesis, outsiders link social representations of black people, criminality and Brixton as a way of emphasising their own distance from Brixton and as a way of denigrating others from the area. A central point of interest for my study, which is generally ignored in SIT studies, is the purpose and consequences of such associations.

“We know the world by sub-dividing it in spheres that we do or do not identify with” (Corbey and Leerssen, 1991, p.xvii). Through the processes of categorisation and comparison we divide others into in-groups and out-groups. In-groups are those groups with which we identify. We seek to characterise ‘our’ groups in positive ways, and so accentuate differences that reflect negatively on out-groups. “In doing so,” Hogg and Abrams (1999) have explained, “the positive connotations of in-group membership become positive connotations of self” (p.10). Group members are motivated to maximise the differences between groups in favour of the in-group, and to emphasise the superiority and distinctiveness of their own group on any valued dimensions - prestige, monetary gains, strength, for example. This intergroup differentiation thus leads to in-group favouritism, in-group conformity and out-group discrimination.

The self-esteem of the individual, Tajfel maintains, guides the characterisation of such groups. This is because identity (and so self-esteem) is tied to group membership. Tajfel (1978) defined social identity as “that *part* of the individual’s self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership” (p.63, italics in original). Other components of self are seen to be human identity (a sense of ourselves as a unique species) and personal identity (a sense of self as a unique, distinctive and so separate individual).

Personal identity relates solely to the self, rather than to the group(s) with which the self identifies. It must not, though, be seen as asocial. All identity is social in that it is socially mediated, and based on intergroup and intragroup comparisons and differentiations. Thus personal, social and human identities operate on a continuum rather than as exclusive categories. My personal identity as a sister incorporates part of my social identity as a woman, for example. There are many identities on this continuum; they may relate to community, gender, family ties, occupation, cultural background, religious affiliation, age and lifestyle. Not all identities are salient at any one time. “Particular self-concepts tend to be activated (‘switched on’) in specific situations producing self-images” (Turner *et al*, 1987, p.44).

Self-categorisation theory (SCT), an offshoot of SIT proposed by Turner *et al* (1987), describes “the process which transforms individuals into groups” (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p.21). This theory “represented a refocus of attention on the cognitive underpinnings of social identity processes” (Hogg and Abrams, 1999, p.11). Turner (1982) describes social identity as “the cognitive mechanism which makes group behaviour possible” (p.21). Whereas SIT focused on how individuals sought to differentiate their own groups positively from others to achieve a positive social identity, SCT focuses on how the individual is able to function within the group in the first place. Turner’s interest is “the self-concept as a cognitive structure and the self-images which are produced by the actual functioning of that structure at any given moment” (p.19). The more we identify with the in-group the more depersonalised we become. This is not a loss of identity, but a change of or gain in, identity (Turner *et al*, 1987). The sum total of the social identifications the individual uses to define herself is her identity (Turner, 1982).

### 1.3. Examining social groups

The main achievement of Tajfel’s prolific work was to establish the fact that social identities are influenced by both group membership and group behaviour. Turner’s life-long study of cognition and identity has also provided ample evidence that “cognitive processes exacerbate the perception of group boundaries” (Operario and Fiske, 1999, p. 43). There continues to be extensive work in this field, as is detailed in the two recent texts *Social Identity and Social Cognition* (Abrams and Hogg, 1999) and *Social Identity: Context, Commitment, Content*, (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje, 1999). Turner and his followers continue to explore the different cognitive processes that underlie identification, one being the ‘meta-contrast’ principle, which is “the tendency for individuals to minimise the perceived variance among members of the same group and maximise the variance between members of different groups” (Operario and Fiske, 1999, p. 43).

A basic assumption of both SIT and SCT is that the social world is divided into particular groups with which we may or may not identify. The forming or transforming of social groups is not the central issue for Tajfel and his students. The theory describes

and explains how individuals seek to position themselves within these groups, and so how they categorise both themselves and others. As Hogg and Abrams (1988) state, identity and group alliances “are inextricably linked in the sense that one’s conception or definition of who one is (one’s identity) is largely composed of self-descriptions in terms of the defining characteristics of social groups to which one belongs” (p.7). Thus in making identifications the individual so ties himself to a group, or a series of overlapping groups.

This is an area of the theory which has come under severe attack (e.g. Wetherell and Potter, 1992). The fact that there ‘are’ social groups is taken for granted. Social reality in SIT and SCT is presented as a given, not a construction. The social construction of groups (Wetherell and Potter, 1992), the distinction between reference and membership groups (Hyman and Singer, 1968), the discriminatory and stigmatising character of categorisation (Breakwell, 1986), and the relations of domination and subordination that rest on social divisions (Thompson, 1990) go untheorised. Tajfel (1969) himself removed these issues from the field of social psychology 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. Categorisation is more restrictive than a matter of an individual voluntarily choosing particular groups and communities with whom to identify. Categorisation may, in fact, be imposed on one. Fanon was keenly aware of this fact: “Where am I to be classified? Or, if you prefer, tucked away?” (1952, p.113). Contrast Turner’s (1987) definition of a psychological group:

... one that is psychologically significant for the members, to which they relate themselves subjectively for social comparison and the acquisition of norms and values, (i.e. with which they compare to evaluate themselves, their abilities, performances, opinions, etc., and from which they take their rules, standards and beliefs about appropriate conduct and attitudes), that they privately accept membership in, and which influences their attitudes and behaviour. (pp.1-2).

This does not address the dynamics behind Fanon's unsettling question. It is not a matter of Fanon privately accepting membership in 'his' group, the black man: his membership is forcefully imposed, burned into Fanon's self-definition by the gaze of the white other. Turner's cognitive account of social identity does not, I believe, 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 Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory provide a partial and somewhat individualistic account of the construction of self-identity.

## 2. Self-identity in Society

Proponents of SIT claim the theory provides a "properly *social* psychological" conception of identity (Hogg and Abrams, 1999, p.9, italics in original). Reicher (1987), for example, boldly states that SIT "avoids either defining a social mind independent of the individual or an individuality independent of society". Hogg and Abrams (1988) have described it as the spearhead of the attack on individualism in social psychology.

SIT seeks to describe how identity is social. The development of identity is seen to be a response to external social reality, that is, a response to the division of the social world into various groups. Hogg and Abrams (1988) suggest that SIT is concerned with how society constructs individuals through the mediation of groups, exemplified by normative or consensual practices, and so, too, how individuals re-create these groups. The social, therefore, structures the individual. The individual's responses and adaptations to the social reproduce the groups and identities that make up the social world. "Society is in the individual as much as individuals are in society" (Turner *et al*, 1987, p.205).

### 2.1. Threatened identities

To test these claims let us look at an example of identification in practice. One particularly relevant to Brixton is that of threatened identities. The work of both Breakwell (1986) and Goffman (1968) is extremely useful in analysing the experiences of threat and stigma in Brixton. Breakwell's detailed account of coping strategies in the face of stigma, and Goffman's perceptive understanding of the management of discrediting information in mixed encounters, provide the basis for my account of the co-construction of identities in Brixton, as is revealed in Chapter Eight. However, as the main focus of this chapter, being identity, not stigma, I shall remain with SIT and SCT.

When one's social group is defined negatively by society at large one's sense of self can be highly negative (Hutnik, 1991). There are, Turner has described, ways of coping with and challenging such definitions. "Members will be motivated either to leave that group physically or dissociate themselves from it psychologically" (Turner, 1982, p.34). They may adopt 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), the re-evaluation of the group (e.g. Black is beautiful) and selecting a new comparison group (religion, as opposed to say, ethnicity). For example, people described as 'immigrants from Pakistan' living in Bradford chose to call themselves Muslims. They achieved a salient identity as Muslims by virtue of publicly burning a copy of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (Haroun, 1997).

In rejecting the stigmatising representations that others have of Brixton, children in this study use all of these strategies. Firstly, there is social mobility. Obviously, the easiest way of removing oneself from association with negative representations of Brixton is to leave the area. For many, however, this is not an option. Some children simply assert that they are '*not-from-Brixton*', even if they live and work in its centre. These extracts illustrate the difficulty some children have in admitting association with Brixton. Significantly, no one in this focus group identified positively with Brixton.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from 'Caroline' refer to myself, as the moderator of focus groups.

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.

Secondly, there is the strategy 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 about community-police relations. For many in Brixton, the police are prejudiced in their treatment of black people and/or Brixtonites. 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" (adult residents). These are examples of how communities actively confront and contest the representations of others (Howarth, 1996).

Intragroup comparisons were evident in some of the children asserting that at least they did not 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:

SH2: "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, is central to my study. By examining how insiders manipulate negative social representations, the intersubjective nature of identity construction becomes apparent. This is particularly



clear in Chapter Six, where I examine how different groups draw on the same representation of Brixton as a diverse community in the negotiation of different identities.

Thus, in the description of threatened identities, SIT and SCT provide an adequate account of how identities can be challenged and so, to some extent, redefined. However, the focus is still on the individual: how groups collectively manipulate and subvert imposed identities remains unclear. We can find individual examples of Turner's strategies: this is true. But how these reactions to stigma emerge from interaction with others and are intersubjectively negotiated and contested remains untheorised.

## 2.2. A snapshot of identity

Identities are *continually* being negotiated, re-negotiated and altered at an intersubjective level (Crossley, 1996). This is not a special case for the socially stigmatised in our society. It is a feature of our intersubjectively agreed, interpreted and constructed social realities (Farr, 1987). Identities, particularly in the transnational, diasporic times in which we live, are inherently unstable for all (Hall, 1997). Intersubjectively we come to agree, to challenge and to manipulate what our social worlds 'are', our position within them, and our own sense of self. We cannot develop and maintain identity alone (Honneth, 1995). Late-modernity, with its mosaic of difference, its simultaneous desire for and fear of the other, its celebration of the exotic, its refuge into history and tradition, has created powerful contradictions and uncertainties (Giddens, 1999). As Weeks (1990) writes, "the sense of dislocation and disorientation, of the rules of the game subtly changing, of the co-existence within us of conflicting needs, desires and identities, is becoming a major cultural experience for all of us" (p.94).

In each and every interaction identities are affirmed, developed, threatened and, sometimes, altered. Imagine for a moment that it was possible to take a snapshot of this otherwise swirling collage. In this snapshot we can see where people are located in various, sometimes overlapping, sometimes mutually exclusive, categories (of gender, class, religion, ethnicity, education, life-style and so forth). This is the picture that SIT provides. It is a static, one-dimensional representation of where individuals are located

on one particular occasion. There are many aspects of identity construction that SIT and SCT set aside: how multiple identities clash and merge; how identities emerge from social encounters, within particular cultural systems; how identities rest on and challenge stigmatising representations; how identities confirm and contest relations of power, for instance. To understand the complexities of contemporary realities, we need theories more attuned to the “flexible and moment-to-moment” nature of identification (Wetherell, 1996a, p. 222).

I admit that this presents SIT as a uniform theory without changes of emphasis over time. Clearly, this is somewhat unfair. In Tajfel’s early work (e.g. 1978) and in that of Sherifs’ (e.g. 1962), for example, who were a profound influence on Tajfel, the dynamics of intergroup relations and the role of power were presented as crucial to understanding the development of identity. In addition, recent developments have attempted to rectify limitations; an example being Vescio *et al* (1999) who offer an extension that recognises multiple group membership. However, SIT, as it is generally known today, is none-the-less guilty of over-playing the agency of the self and underplaying the power of representations of oneself held by others.

The central character in these theories, particular Turner’s, is “an individual striving to achieve a satisfactory concept or image of himself” (Tajfel, 1978, p.61). The role of history and the role of emotion is set to one side (Jahoda, 1999). I would not want to suggest that positive self-esteem is not a crucial part of our social psychology, far from it as this thesis testifies. However, the problem, here, 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. The theory contains a conception of the individual as a bounded, self-contained subject, comprising particular attributes. Identity construction and development is more than the matching of certain attributes (e.g. femininity or ethnicity) to certain groups (women or British) and so forming different

identities (gender identity or ethnic identity). What is needed, I suggest, is a focus on the dialogue, reactivity and hybridisation of identities.

### 2.3. "Let's look at them funny!"<sup>2</sup>

SIT and SCT reflect the perspective of the participant. It is as if written from 'above', looking down on the inter-relationships and affiliations made between various individuals. Turner's (1982) ambition was to uncover the cognitive mechanisms underlying social comparison, social categorisation and social identity. In designing numerous experiments to uncover identity processes, Turner inadvertently stripped away the social content of identities, ignoring Tajfel's (1984) insight: "we require not only a theory of the cognitive organisation of stereotypes but also a functional theory of the *contents* of stereotypes" (p.698). The process and content of identity construction should, I suggest, be examined together. Dividing groups on the basis of picture preferences in a psychology experiment, as Turner's (1970) experiments did, does not involve the same socio-cognitive challenges as living in a socially stigmatised area. Within the psychology laboratory we cannot feel the gaze of the other, and the impression it makes on one's perception of oneself (Sartre, 1948). "We are not left to define ourselves as we see fit", Ryan (1999, p. 146) recognises. In this study, children describe how others "look at" or "look on" them. They tell many stories about this: being criminalised by outsiders, being stared at in the street, and being exoticised, for example. For most, these experiences provoke anger; for others they provoke guilt, confusion and "self-hate" (Theo). Part II contains many of these stories.

SCT does not help us understand these. Its emphasis is on how we categorise ourselves, not how others categorise us. Thus the dialectics between the oppression of categorisation and the liberation of (re)identification are ignored. As Hall (1991a) 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 community identity, therefore, we need to examine how others outside of the community re-present it.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a quote from Malcolm, a 13-year-old boy who lives in Brixton. This is, in his opinion, how outsiders perceive people from Brixton. Other children in different focus groups used exactly the same expression.

Although identity is rooted in our relation to others, it is more than the simple taking on of the impressions of the other. We do not adopt the representations that others have of us without some protest, without some re-working of these representations. Our identities are a reaction to, or a reaction against, the way others see us (Jenkins, 1996). The children and the adults in my study provide clear evidence of this. They do not simply take on the representations that others have of the area where they live and apply them to their selves. Nor do they simply create their own identities in isolation from the outside world. Instead they rework others' representations of them to provide a more positive basis for the negotiation of identity.

As SCT is embedded within a Cartesian paradigm, and so is focused on the individual, it does not help us understand the collaborative nature of identity. SIT provides an account of how the division of the social world into groups relates to the differing identities which an individual may assume. It can be a social account in so far as it examines the social content of identities (Ellemers, Spears and Doosje, 1999). But the focus remains at the level of the individual because SIT fails to integrate the *social* aspects of the content and the *social* aspects of the process of identification (Wetherell, 1996b; Duveen, forthcoming). How different categories are socially represented, the role of others in the creation of self, the intersubjectively agreed and contested nature of identities - these are key issues for a social account of identity. These topics are, at best, peripheral in SIT (Tajfel's early work, e.g. 1978), and at worst, ignored (Turner's later work, e.g. 1982). What we need is a more rigorously 'social' account, which deals explicitly with the intersubjectivity of the emergence, development and defence of identity.

### 3. The Intersubjective Self

Identity "is simultaneously subjective and social, and is constituted in and through culture" (Brah, 1996, p.21). If we are to understand the interrelationships between community and identity, we need to recognise the role of the other in the co-construction of identities. We need an account of how individuals construct a sense of self and a sense of community in interaction with others. To understand how people identify with Brixton, that is, we need to look beyond their self-categorisations. We must examine

how others see them, how the outside media, for example, re-presents Brixton, and how those in the area react to the representations which others hold about them.

This examination should begin with the dynamics between “how we have been represented and how that bears on how we represent ourselves” (Hall, 1996, p.4). We need a theory of the relationship between self-awareness and the social representations others have of us. An adequately social account of identity should begin, I propose, with the dialectic of other and self. The best place to open this examination is the work of George Herbert Mead (1934, 1972).

### 3.1. The dialectics of self

In order to theorise the impact of social representations of a community on identities we first need to assert the intersubjective nature of identity. Mead’s conceptualisation of the reflective nature of self-consciousness allows us to do this systematically. He distinguished between two components of self: the I and the me. The me is the societal voice of the other within our consciousness. The me looks back on the spontaneous and innovating I, making sense of it and reacting to it from the perspective of society, or significant others within society. The I is “the perceiving, acting, speaking, feeling body-subject, which is not (yet) reflectively aware of either itself or its world” (Crossley, 1996, p.55). When we try to understand the actions and reactions of the I, we imagine how others would describe, approve or censure them. This applies to past, present and future interactions. The me, then, the voice of the generalised other, allows the possibility of reflection, planning and anticipation.

However, we never know exactly what we shall do or say until we actually do it. “It is because of the I that we say that we are never fully aware of what we are, that we surprise ourselves by our own action. It is as we act that we are aware of ourselves” (Mead, 1967, p.174). The I only knows itself in the past tense, that is, as me. The me is the I’s objectification, its image of itself. It involves conceiving of itself as another would conceive of it, that is, taking the perspective of the other on oneself. And so the me is not only the past responses of others, it is also the anticipated responses of others. This emphasis on the reflexive nature of self closely follows Cooley’s (1902) concept of

the 'looking-glass self'. Here, others act as mirrors in which a person sees and responds to her image.

These two aspects of the self - the I and the me - explain how identity locates us within a society of others and establishes our difference from others. To form a stable identity we must embed ourselves within a matrix of shared knowledge and understanding. One so forms a 'generalised other' within oneself. This is the me. At the same time, a boundary, albeit contested and transformed, must be established between this other and oneself. The story of I, how the me makes sense of I, while based on the shared representations of one's culture, is a unique story. Its main purpose is to maintain difference, and so to build a distinct identity. As Honneth (1995) explains in his insightful text *The Struggle for Recognition*, "in perceiving my own vocal gesture and reacting to myself as counterpart does, I take on a decentred perspective, from which I can form an image of myself and thereby come to a consciousness of my identity" (p.74).

### 3.2. Children's developing self-reflexivity

In focus group discussions, it was clear that, at times, these dialectics between a spontaneous comment and the imagined response of others guided conversations. The purpose of focus groups is to create an unthreatening context for spontaneous discussion and lively debate. The participants should be knowledgeable about the topics focused on. This does not necessarily mean that they are accustomed to talking about these topics in this way, however. In this study, the children clearly know what Brixton is, how others see it and how they, themselves, feel about its negative image in wider society. However, I got the impression that, for many, this was a rare opportunity to explain the context of their everyday experiences to a stranger. The presence of an outsider, myself, heightened their self-awareness, as they became conscious of how others would react to their experiences. In a way, these discussions made them (re)consider their everyday encounters afresh. Take this example of racist treatment by the police:

Theo: Like a policeman came to my house, yeah, and my mum locked the parlour and the police said 'Why is it locked?' I said, 'My mum don't open it because of too much of burglary around here, where I live'. He says 'I'm not even sure if there is a white body in there'. You know, that is a racism.

Winston (*speaking directly to me*): How can you have that, yeah? It's like a policeman in your house and you shut your living room, and he says 'there is a black man in there'! And that is the thing, you can't sue them cos then they say it's only your say (word).

Theo: There is no real point because cos when he comes to think about it by himself, he won't know what he's said is wrong.

Winston: The next time they come you can maybe get your tape recorder just in case!

*(Laughter)*

Winston: I just cannot believe it! That is ... (*makes an expression of complete incredulity*). That is ... phew! You know what I mean!

This demonstrates how we take on the perspective of the generalised other to make sense of our own experience. My presence in this focus group forced these boys to acknowledge my perspective. They know that for a white outsider this story is shocking. In fact, I remember being shocked. These boys were children: small, noisy and amusing. Imagining them as criminals was difficult. Imagining them realising the extent of others' prejudices against them was distressing.

In order to establish a sense of difference, one has to develop a sense of distance from oneself. Mead describes how children do this first through play, particularly forms of play which involve changing role and, second, through team games. In play children pretend to be someone else. They take on various social roles. This particularises and relativises the child's own perspective *qua* child. It also enables the child to take an outside view of self and to address self from the outside (as 'Mummy', for example). This allows the child to develop the reflexive relation to itself that is constitutive of self-identity (Crossley, 1996). In a team game each player views their own actions from the point of view of a number of their fellow players simultaneously, as well as their opponents, and from the abstract and general purpose and rule structure of the game as a whole. The child has to consider the aim of each team as well as the aims of different players, such as attacker, defender, and goalie. This involves the dialectic of the particular and the universal. The child learns to see herself as a particular member of a

larger group and to judge herself, in her particularity, against the universal standards of this group. She at once learns to differentiate herself and to identify with a community of others and its traditions.

To know oneself, then, goes hand-in-hand with knowing the other. “To exist is to be called into being in relation to an Otherness” (Bhabha, 1990, p.xv). As we learn about otherness, we learn about self. How does Mead explain this? How can we access the world that-is-other-to-us, the meanings outside of ourselves? Through significant gestures, Mead describes, people construct and convey symbolic meaning. Mead meant this both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. In both senses, mind emerges naturally out of a conversation of gestures. Communication, interpersonal relations, and the social construction of community all require the development and sharing of such gestures (what we can call language, Farr, 1987). Significant gestures convey social representations and so provide the key to the world of the other. Understanding significant gestures enables the sharing of culture and the understanding of otherness. Appreciating otherness corresponds with appreciating self. Thus, self-consciousness and self-identity can only emerge intersubjectively.

### 3.3. Building identity through social representations

Social representations, to my mind, are the content of the generalised other. They are the resources that the me utilises in objectifying and constructing the self. The construction of identity parallels the discovery and the elaboration of social representations of one’s culture. Thus identification and social 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.

For a child to come to terms with his world he needs to grasp hold of, relate to, and manipulate the way in which this world is represented by others and by self. These representations, or codes as Hall (1996) has called them, may “be so widely distributed in a specific language, community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed” (p.132). They are, that is, *naturalised*. Piaget (1968) has theorised how the child needs “to ‘assimilate’ the external world to structures that have



already been constructed” and “to readjust these structures as a function of subtle transformations, i.e. to ‘accommodate’ them to external objects” (p.8). In this way the child takes on the ‘presentation’ of the world as he finds it, relates it to past experience and understanding, and so re-presents it to himself. Language is “the vehicle for concepts and ideas and belongs to everyone, and it reinforces individual thought with a vast system of collective concepts” (Piaget, 1968, p.22). 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.

In order to understand what it is to be a member of a particular culture, to share and to communicate with others, and to create and maintain bonds within that culture, particular representations have to be made one’s own. What Piaget calls ‘formal thinking’, that is systematic internal reflection which is not directly attached to concrete reality, enables the adolescent to “build its own reflections and theories” (Piaget, 1968, p.63). From the age of 12 the child is conscious of these representations and theories of the world, and so is able to explain them to others.<sup>3</sup> Formal thinking, which is evident from this age, involves drawing on the representations of others, while developing these representations in individually distinct ways. This is because adolescents, like adults, use shared knowledge to interpret their own experiences. Through the sharing of social representations, the self becomes embedded in communities of others. Through the particularising of these representations, the self maintains its difference from others.

Each individual stands in a unique position in this network of social representations. This position is the consequence of many things - the combination of her past experiences and memories, the external constraints and limits on her ‘possibility-space’, and her present needs and concerns (Tolman, 1994). From her perspective, or viewing-point, in discussion with others, she makes sense of the world around her. Through efforts to navigate through networks of representations, and to locate themselves within them, individuals negotiate an identity (Duveen and Lloyd, 1986). These social-developmental psychologists, drawing on both Moscovici (1984) and Piaget (1932),

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<sup>3</sup> For this reason I have chosen children from the age of 12 upwards as my participants for this study.

describe how “children are born into a particular culture and to become competent functioning members of their culture must re-construct for themselves the categories of that culture” (Duveen and Lloyd, 1986, p.221). Similarly, Berger and Luckmann (1967) have described how “the individual realises himself in society – that is, he recognises his identity in socially defined terms and these definitions become reality as he lives in society” (p.107). How does this happen? “Social representations are the building blocks of the self”, Oyserman and Markus suggest (1998, p.118).

Social representations provide the ‘scaffolding’ for the child’s efforts to build a perspective for themselves in the social 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 herself with the dominant representations around her, 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.

### 3.4. Temporal identities

Through constructing an identity children “draw upon the social representations available to them and in doing so locate themselves in a particular position within this collective system of meaning” (Duveen, 1994, p.3). That is, they become competent members of particular social groups. The processes of negotiation and re-construction that established the identity of the child are not confined to childhood. Throughout life “we experience and come to know ourselves and others in terms of the social representations we bring to bear” (Oyserman and Markus, 1998, p.123). In our everyday interaction we need to negotiate the new, the strange, and the contradictory. In doing so, we re-negotiate our conception of self.

Social representations pass from the social to the personal. Or, as Vygotsky (1978) put it: “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first on the social

level, and later, on the individual level; first *between* people (*inter-psychological*), and then *inside* the child (*intra-psychological*)” (p.57, italics in original). Social representations do not pass unchanged from the social to the personal: in the act of representing, of relating a representation to one’s understanding of the world and to one’s sense of self, social representations are refined, elaborated, and particularised.

Social representations are, thus, both dynamic and reactive. They are sensitive to history, ideology, context and to the agencies of individuals and of collectivities. Why a particular representation may be challenged, elaborated, rejected, or accepted, can and should be explained by the interplay between social re-presentation and identity. Identity should be seen as a “‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall, 1990, p.222). Just as the establishment and development of identity rests on social re-presentation, so social representations emerge and are sustained by the process of identification. “There is no possibility of identity without the work of representation” (Jovchelovitch, 1996, p.126).

Our past experiences and understandings, our present affiliations and personal interests, our hopes and fears for the future, guide the use and development of particular representations. Thus, the negotiation of social representations can be a very personal experience. Not all children who live in Brixton react in the same way to outsiders’ representations, for example. Different children, for different reasons, approach the problem of identity construction in different ways. To understand this, we must be able to analyse the temporal and multiple dimensions of identity. In her informative study of contested identities, Brah has made a similar point:

Identity “is a constantly changing relational multiplicity. ... Indeed, identity may be understood *as that very process by which the multiplicity, contradiction, and instability of subjectivity is signified as having coherence, continuity, stability; as having a core - a continually changing core but a sense of core nonetheless - that at any given moment is enunciated as the ‘I’.* (Brah, 1996, p.124, italics in original).

Identity, as Ferguson (1998) has pointed out, “is a relational concept rather than an essence” (p.81). As our conception of otherness changes, so, too, does our conception of self. This relates to the reciprocal relationship between the me and the I. As

Jovchelovitch (1996) has recognised, “it is in the overlapping space of the me and the not-me that both representations and identities emerge” (p.126). Because the me, the voice of the other, is never fixed, the way we make sense of the I also changes over time. The I, in itself, can never be observed; it can only be known retrospectively. As soon as the I acts, it ceases to be an I. It becomes part of the past and the individual can then recall it as part of the me (Mead, 1934). Hence, the I can never completely coincide with itself. Thus the self is something that we can never fully know.

Identity, as Breakwell (1983) recognised, is “a selective, active, adaptive process” (p.12). Even in the relatively short time period of a focus group, individuals present themselves in different ways as different interests emerge. For example, some children identified with Brixton when a representation of a culturally aware and tolerant community emerged. When Brixton was presented as poor and criminal, the same children rejected association. If asked directly “Where are you from?” these children expressed confusion. One simply said, “I don't know what I am really” (Salote). For those stigmatised, realising that others’ representations of you differ from your own, may lead to the feelings of being a stranger even to yourself (Goffman, 1968).

#### 4. Identity and Community

By saying who we are, we are also striving to express what we are, what we believe and what we desire. The problem is that these beliefs, needs and desires are often patently in conflict, not only between different communities but within the individuals themselves. (Weeks, 1990, p.89).

Identity, I have argued, is constructed and maintained within a network of representations held by others and by self. In the process of making sense of the world, in adopting the social representations of a community, one claims community membership, and so makes these representations one’s own. Identity emerges through the negotiation of social representations. Furthermore, identity is maintained and defended through social representations. In taking up and taking on representations, individuals build up a knowledge of themselves and of their social groups. Their identities may be consolidated, enriched, modified and undercut. Identity, then, can explain the different perspectives people have, why they draw on particular representations, and ignore or contest others. Representations are manipulated to fit the

narrative of self that makes up identity. Identity is negotiated through the representations that others have of you. In collaboration with others, one may reject, confirm and manipulate these representations.

#### 4.1. Contested identities

Communities may not share the representations that others have of them. Members of stigmatised groups such as those in Brixton may not have the representational resources to simply reject the representations of others. They are more likely to use the same representations in different ways. Brixtonites may manipulate others' representations of them to create a more positive representation of Brixton and so a more positive identity.

Representations are neither solely an expression of 'identity', nor solely a reflection of 'the world out there'. They are co-constructed in a process of mediation as the subject shapes, and is shaped, by her understanding of the world. Individuals not only strive to make sense of the world in which they live through representations, but in the act of social re-presentation they co-construct a specific place for themselves in this world. In examining the co-construction of a community identity, particularly in the context of a stigmatised area, the intersubjectively agreed and contested nature of identities becomes all the more apparent.

In order to develop and to maintain a sense of oneself as unique, issues of similarity to, and of difference from, others are constantly negotiated. It entails an assimilation, a bonding, and a degree of uniformity. But, at the same time, it also involves diversification and celebration of difference. In order to understand the world in which I live I must see myself as part of that world and as separate from it at one-and-the-same time. Thus identity is based on maintaining and developing both community and otherness simultaneously. As the Whalsayman in Cohen's (1978) study of the Whalsay community in Shetland asserted, "Du kens, we're aa' da same here – but different too!" (p.469).

Otherness is, however, increasingly plural and fragmented. While the social world comprises 'others', there are different degrees of otherness. People appear 'closer to' or

'further away from' one's own conception of self. Those who appear 'very different' from us, strange or foreign, jeopardise our sense of belonging, our commonality, our identity. As Rutherford (1990) points out, "who ever we are, difference threatens to decentre us" (p.13). In the face of difference, bonds with others that affirm one's narrative of self and narrative of commonality become all the more important. People have a need to connect, and to share culture, experience and desire (Geertz, 1973). Together such groups create a sense of belonging, of common values, of community (Silverstone, 1999b).

#### 4.2. Out of many – one community

Community, like identity, is plural, fragmented, and interwoven with difference. "Communities of identity are never monolithic: they embody traditions of arguments and debate" (Weeks, 1990, p.98). There are many communities that one may belong to simultaneously, and there are communities within communities (Baumann, 1996). For example, in Brixton there are "a lot of different communities who live within the Brixton area" (SH3), "just sort of communities just existing side by side" (SH2). Those in the study referred to these different communities as black, white, West Indian, Afro-Caribbean, Portuguese, Chinese, Vietnamese, student, gay, religious and "bad" communities.

At the same time, there is general agreement that Brixton is 'a' community. People talk about "the Brixton community", describing it as "positive, thriving" (SH1) and "a good loving community" (Sam), for example. During demonstrations in the area, such as protests against the Brixton bomb in April 1999, people claim "a community against racism".

Identifying with different communities leads to interweaving of various identities within one individual (e.g. British, Black, Nigerian, and Christian). Rather than different identities co-existing within an individual and different identities being 'switched on' as a function of situations, as Turner (1982) has suggested, identities may be intimately connected, and may validate and refine each other (Hall, 1991a). Both Fanon (1952) and Bhabha (1990), for example, have elaborated upon the interconnections between sexual

and ethnic identities. What insiders in this study stress is that diversity is what makes Brixton a distinct or “special” community (*brixton online*). Many are proud of this mix of identities within their community. So much so that in school1, that they have adapted the Jamaican motto on her Coat of Arms ‘out of many - one’ to their school theme: ‘Out of many – one community’. SH1 is clearly proud of the diversity in the school and the fact that “we are all one as a school, and basically we are all together”.

Rather than examining ‘an’ identity or ‘a’ community, we need to discuss overlapping identities and merging communities. As cultural differences become more commonplace, discussions of a single community or a common identity become increasingly inappropriate to an analysis of modern society. As Hall (1991a) has observed, “the great collective social identities of class, of race, of nation, of gender, and of the West ... cannot any longer be thought of in the same homogenous form. We are as attentive to their inner differences, their inner contradictions, their segmentations and their fragmentations as we are to their already-completed homogeneity, their unity and so on” (p.45). It is these ‘great collective social identities’ that SIT and SCT dealt with. To grasp the multiplicity and reactivity of identity, we need a perspective that focuses on the co-membership of communities, and the intersubjectively agreed upon and contested nature of these communities. The theory of social representations offers this possibility.

#### 4.3. Establishing borders

Identity is about belonging (Cohen, 1994). The groups to which an individual belongs ground his perceptions, attitudes and feelings (Lewin, 1952). This can refer both to the physical locality one calls ‘home’ and the cultural space where one feels ‘at home’. However, the individual is not free to ‘pick and choose’ a community. The symbolic boundaries or borders between communities and identities not only demarcate difference, but also operate as mechanisms of inclusion and of exclusion (Solomos and Back, 1996). Lewin (1948) has also made this point: -

It is as well to recognise that every underprivileged minority group is kept together not only by the cohesive force among its members, but also by the boundary which the majority erects against the crossing of an individual from the minority group to the majority group. It is in the interest of the majority group to keep the minority in its underprivileged status. (p.91).

Borders demarcate self from other, insider from outsider, encountered social groups from alien social groups. These are “dividing lines to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others” (Brah, 1996, p.198). Borders, though imagined, contested and permeable, are essential to the stable self-definition of a community (Cohen, 1994). They provide for members of the community a source of security and of defence. As I argued in Chapter Two, communities and their borders are constructed and disputed in the negotiation of the social representations held by community members and the social representations held by those outside the community.

People use social representations to establish and communicate shared meanings and, as a consequence, affiliations with others. Identities are performed through the choice and use of social representations about one’s group or community (Lloyd and Duveen, 1992). For example, children who identify with Brixton elaborate the same social representations quite differently from children who distance themselves from the area. Thus, the use of particular representations reveals how these children position themselves in relation to Brixton. The differences in the use of representations mark where the symbolic borders of Brixton begin and end.

For all those in diasporic communities the clash and fusion of difference results in hybrid identities and overlapping communities. Brah (1996) describes diasporas as the “contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure” (p.193). Diasporas throw identities and communities together, resulting in both discord and enriched understanding. Culture shock, differences in perspectives, curiosity for and of the other, threaten individual and community identities. In such settings, the need for the foreigner, the children of newcomers, *and* the native constantly to re-negotiate identity and community is all the more intense.

While otherness can provide the comfort of affirming one’s identity through establishing difference, otherness can also threaten the coherence of one’s identity by uncovering “hidden traits which compromise the narrative of self-identity” (Giddens, 1991, p.67). “It is the threat of the dissolution of self that ignites the irrational hatred and hostility as the centre struggles to assert and secure its boundaries, that construct



self from not-self” (Rutherford, 1990, p.11). While Rutherford is right in this - otherness as difference can and does lead to antagonism and discrimination, it is important not to forget the creative and conciliatory aspects of difference. The other *is* threatening; one *is* always in the position of defining and redefining self in relation to the non-self. However, this does not always lead to “irrational hatred and hostility”; it may lead to “cultural symbiosis, improvisation, and innovation” (Brah, 1996, p.41). Difference does not always result in hierarchy and oppression. My study is a testimony to the lure, the appreciation and the creativity of difference. In Brixton difference is celebrated (school prospectus).

However, as one school-head put it with reference to her pupils, multiculturalism does “really enrich their lives, but, for some it is a problem” (SH3). It is a problem because difference can equate with inequality and hostility. In examining identity and community in Brixton questions of difference and particularly the stigmatising nature of difference become paramount. Who is it who defines difference? Why do some suffer more than others in the construction of difference? How is difference contested? These questions can only be tackled when we have established what this difference is, that is, how different groups represent Brixton. Thus, they are returned to in Part II of the thesis.

Identity may “only become an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty” (Mercer, 1990, p.43). The Black British in Alexander’s (1996) study, for example, saw themselves as black when in England, and English when in the Caribbean. How others saw them, how they diverged from the norm, therefore, gave them their sense of self. Their ‘otherness’ is made acutely salient by the gaze of the other. Not only is one made aware of one’s otherness by the gaze of the dominant other, but also one learns what ‘otherness’ *is*. Identity, and therefore community, are questions no one, but particularly those stigmatised, can avoid.

#### 4.4. Diasporic identities

Despite imagination to the contrary, the British 'nation', 'community', or 'culture' does not remain impervious to the 'strangers'. Its boundaries have been altered and reshaped to create a new identity; a hybrid, perhaps, but no more imagined and no less real. (Alexander, 1996, p.6).

There are different ways to cope with being seen as different. The tired notions of assimilation and acculturation do not fit the realities of the fragmented and diasporic communities of our society (see Lewin, 1952 and Tajfel, 1981b; also Hutnik, 1991). Complete assimilation, even if desired, is impossible when one is 'looked on' as different (Gervais and Jovchelovitch, 1998b). The 'melting pot' metaphor that, in time, cultural differences would be worn away and become forgotten as the children of migrants immersed themselves in the dominant culture, is hopelessly inadequate and patronising in assuming the dominance and prevalence of so-called 'host' cultures over others.

Diasporias of different communities, diversification of all cultures, fascination for the exotic, and fear of difference, with its sometimes tragic and bloody consequences, are distinctive features of the late-modern world. The negotiation of identity in such settings is not a simple matter of rejecting old identities and adopting new ones (Back, 1996). For any of the 'other' in this country it is not a matter of 'choosing' between different identities - Black, African, Mediterranean, Chinese or British, as this multi-heritage child proudly asserts:

Vicky: I am a mix. I am just full of all countries. Cos my mum's side is from Jamaica, and my dad's side from America and Jamaica and England, and there is family all over the place, (including) Chinese.

"With the development of modern society," particularly the development of mass communication, Thompson (1995) has argued, "the process of self-formation becomes reflexive and more open-ended" (p.207). The self consists in "the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives" (Giddens, 1991). In the post-traditional order of late modernity, social theorists such as Frosh (1991), Bauman (1991) and Beck (1992) agree, the self becomes increasingly reflexive, or ambiguous (Mercer, 1990). As Hall (1996) explains "identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured" (p.4). Today, as distinct from earlier times, the need to negotiate alterity and so identity, is unending (van Alphen, 1991). "No longer

stable and continuous, identity becomes uncertain and problematical” (Robins, 1996, p.92). Due to the technological, cultural and religious changes of the 20th century, we are constantly bombarded with the new, the strange, and the foreign. Difference permeates our lives: it fascinates us, it threatens us. The local and the global interweave into the fabric of both identity and community. This necessitates, more than ever before, a constant re-evaluation of our histories, our cultures, our identities. Consequently, many have argued, “identity, whether at the individual or national level, has become much more fragile nowadays than in previous generations” (Ferguson, 1998, p.4). While identities are more contested in the world we live in, they are also more creative. Increasingly, Morley and Robins (1995) point out, we are presented with the “possibility of reinventing and re-articulating international and local cultures and identities” (p.2).

The process of forming an identity is never complete. This is a consequence of the constantly changing demands and challenges of representational activity. Social representation and identification inter-relate what one was, with what one is, and with what one might or could be. They are two intertwined processes which tell the narrative of self, linking memory, experience and hope. Cultural identity, as Hall (1991b) writes, “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past” (p. 225).

Brah (1996) has argued that “the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively” (p.183). The stories that have emerged from Brixton speak of people resisting singular categories and stigmatising representations. This adds to the increasing literature that documents “the cultural creativity of young people who reside in multiracial areas” (Back, 1996, p.11; see also Alexander, 1996, and Baumann, 1996). These studies expose the importance of difference in the negotiation of identity and community in the context of both the local and the global.

My study of Brixton highlights the dialectics of identity and re-presentation that constitute the everyday experience of performing community. It is not only those stigmatised that feel the threat and challenge of difference: identity and community are under threat, re-negotiation and transformation for all (Wetherell, 1996a). In multi- or trans-cultural societies, identities and communities are always and inherently unsettled. The fact that Brixton has to contest the stigmatising representations of others in order to assert a more positive identity makes these dialectics salient. From the particular example of Brixton we can look to the more general significance of social representations of the community; that is, we can propose a social psychology of community.

### In conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the constructed, intersubjective and temporal nature of identities in relation to the social construction of community. I have turned to the main social psychological theories of identity and self, Tajfel's and Mead's, and scrutinised them in light of some of my findings from this study. This has allowed me to explore how far these theories take me in making sense of social representations and identities in Brixton. Examining stigma, which pervades everyday life in Brixton, highlights the partiality of SIT and SCT. These theories fail to grasp the intersubjective basis of identity, as the focus remains at the level of how individuals define and evaluate themselves (Turner, 1982). Mead's conception of the self allows for a more complete analysis. From here, we can begin to unravel the dialectics between re-presentation and identity. The accounts from Brah's (1996) study and from Brixton itself broaden the analysis by accounting for the re-negotiation and transformation of late modern, diasporic identities (Hall, 1990).

These theories provide the framework for my inquiry into the everyday significance of community. They guide my focus, the selection of participants, the choice of questions, as well as my on-going analysis of Brixton. However, there are still unanswered questions. For example, how is it that some children assert remarkable self-confidence in the face of such stigma, while others seem less able to reject stigmatising representations? How is this stigma imposed? How is it contested?

It is to answer these questions that I turn to the study itself. Before revealing the different perspectives on Brixton, I need to explain the process of analysis. The theories of self-identity expounded above guided the analysis of focus group and inter-view material. What I want to illustrate is that my appreciation of the intricacies of identity construction emerged in the very process of analysis. This is the project of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### Analysing Divergent Perspectives

#### 1. Different Perspectives

- 1.1. The coding frame
- 1.2. Explanations of Brixton
- 1.3. Perceptions of Brixton
- 1.4. Consequences of divergent perspectives

#### 2. The Analysis of Representations

- 2.1. Searching for social representations
- 2.2. Fragments and wholes
- 2.3. Using *Nud\*ist* for the study of social representations

#### 3. Insiders, Outsiders and Neighbours

- 3.1. Identifying with the community
- 3.2. Strangers to Brixton
- 3.3. Vacating Brixton

#### 4. The Situational Nature of Identities

- 4.1. Group dynamics
- 4.2. Conflict in the group
- 4.3. Address and identity

In this chapter I illustrate the process of analysis of all collected data on which this thesis is based. The theories of social representations (Moscovici, 1984), self-identity (Mead, 1934; Tajfel, 1978) and the social construction of community (Cohen, 1995) discussed in the previous chapters have directed how I have coded and assessed the material collected. In presenting the coding frame I establish the importance of perspective. What this reveals is that children use different narrative styles to establish and defend identities in relation to Brixton. Social representations provide them with the content of these narratives (Jovchelovitch, 1995a). I explore the complexity of social representations and explain how they emerged in the analysis of data. The computer programme, *Nud\*ist*, was a valuable tool in exploring the breadth, depth and detail of the dominant representations found in the study. For the most part children position themselves as either insiders in Brixton, or they distance themselves from the area and so establish the position as neighbours to Brixton. The complex relationship between perspective, representation and identity illustrates the situational and temporal nature of each of these social psychological phenomena.

## 1. Different Perspectives

The relationship between theory, method and analysis is complex. Theories inform one's choice of methods and process of analysis of data (Hammersley, 1993). Methods reflect theoretical assumptions and influence the type of analysis undertaken. Analysis 'tests' and develops theoretical and methodological assumptions (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). It is in the analysis of data that the researcher has the potential, at least, of making a contribution to his field (Bryman, 1988).

In order for readers to evaluate the arguments developed from this analysis, it is necessary that the whole process of analysis is made explicit. Surprisingly, "there is a reluctance of many (if not most) authors to lay bare the procedures associated with the analysis of data" (Bryman and Burgess, 1983, p. 216). Often it is this part of the research, the analysis, that is the least accessible (Hammersley, 1993), sometimes being relegated to the appendices. It is my contention that this weakens the thesis in obscuring the elaboration of main findings and that this, in turn, protects the thesis from informed critique.

Within research on social representations this omission has fuelled the criticism that the theory is ambiguous (Potter and Litton, 1985) and contradictory (Jahoda, 1988). There are often unanswered questions: From where does a social representation emerge? Is a social representation ever 'complete'? How does one draw distinctions between different representations? In order for these questions to be addressed within the context of my own research, I shall reveal my own process of analysis. In order that the reader can judge the claims and analytic categories I present, I have incorporated extracts from the data. This is not to reveal my findings; rather it is to explain how those findings were reached. As the actual coding of material "represents the first step in the conceptualisation of the data" (Bryman and Burgess, 1983, p. 218), this is where I shall begin.

### 1.1. The coding frame

What emerged from the analysis of data were different accounts or versions of Brixton. Different accounts convey and protect different perspectives (Hammersley and

Atkinson, 1983). Mead (1934) has argued that a perspective is a specific point in space and time. It is where people locate themselves in relation to their social world within the networks of difference and similarity that connect them and distance them from others. In the course of an inter-view or a focus group people may speak from different perspectives, at times from one, at times from another. People are well able to argue the same point from different, sometimes contradictory, perspectives (Billig, 1987). What is significant for my analysis is not that people may be inconsistent (Festinger, 1962), nor that they may be swayed by the dynamics of others around them (Tanford and Penrod, 1984), but that perspectives are claimed and defended to assert different identities. If people adopt contradictory perspectives it is because self-identity is elaborate, hybrid and temporal (Jenkins, 1996). This was established in the previous chapter. It is the job of the social psychologist to make sense of how the intersubjectivity of social positioning develops and why different positions are defended at different times in different contexts.

A perspective can only be understood in relation to other perspectives (Mead, 1934). Therefore, it is always dependent on the perspectives of others and the recognition of difference between these perspectives. Let me illustrate this: a child may angrily assert a very positive version of Brixton when challenged by the negative versions of others at one point in a focus group. Later on, when discussing an aspect of the area that is not especially contested, they may switch to a more negative version of Brixton. This does not mean that their 'true' feelings have been compromised or that they have been provoked into distorting their own perspective. What this tells us is that perspectives are reactive to context, the presence of others and the content of discussion. It is one thing to say that you are from Brixton when the wealth of diverse cultures is being praised; quite another thing when people who live there are described as a dangerous and criminal. A perspective, I argue, is a collectively negotiated objective point in space/time from which events are collectively viewed.

The best way to explain this is through my findings. When children talk about Brixton they adopt two different narrative strategies (Jovchelovitch, 1995a). One is to explain "how Brixton really is" (Vicky); the other is to describe how Brixton appears to be. In



the first case, they speak with the authority of an expert, an insider *explaining* the reality of Brixton. In the second case, they position themselves outside the area, as detached observers, and give their *perceptions* of Brixton from this distance. I have called these two perspectives ‘explanations’ and ‘perceptions’.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of data collection this binary coding frame developed. As Hammersley (1993) advises, it is important to develop reflexivity towards the research design, data collection and analysis. In the course of continued fieldwork I reflected on the value of the coding frame, and realised that a third category had emerged. There were times when people acknowledge the meeting of these two different perspectives, when *explanations* meet *perceptions* of Brixton. They may reflect on the consequences of outsiders’ representations clashing with insiders’ representations, the power of the external discourses to direct the social construction of Brixton, or the effect of stigmatising representations on the self-identities and self-esteem of those living in the area. At such moments they speak not so much as experts of the area, explaining how Brixton ‘is’, nor as observers offering their perceptions of Brixton. They adopt a more reflective narrative style that concentrates on the consequences of the divergence in perspectives. The meeting of ‘explanations’ and ‘perceptions’ is a potential space of the inbetween, a space of conflict, of critique and of possibility. I have called this space ‘*consequences*’.

The coding frame, therefore, has three main branches – explanations, perceptions and consequences. In each of these broad categories, many other themes and sub-themes arose from the data. I used 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 categories become more

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<sup>1</sup> I realise that these labels are not wholly satisfactory. ‘Explanations’ are, of course, a form of ‘perception’. Neither is the third label, which I shall come on to discuss, ‘consequences’, completely satisfactory. However, these rough categories were the tools I worked with before the two distinct social representations emerged. They are simply an analytical device, and not meant to reflect patterns and contradictions in the data exactly. For further detail see Appendix I.

distinct. Appendix I contains the final version of the coding frame and further details of each category.

### 1.2. Explanations of Brixton

There are three main aspects to explaining life in Brixton. These can be loosely classified as benefits, difficulties and mixed feelings. When speaking from this perspective of ‘explanations’, people are more likely to highlight the benefits of Brixton rather than its difficulties. Children in all ethnic groups and of all skin-colours explain that “it’s really easy to make friends in Brixton” (Vicky) and that “Brixton has a really nice atmosphere” (Weona). Other benefits of living in Brixton are the diversity of foods, cultures and beliefs, increased tolerance levels, a thriving music scene, and numerous social activities in terms of shopping, sports and community groups.

This is not to say that the difficulties of living within a diverse community are ignored. In positioning themselves as people who ‘know’ about the area, children speak about conflict between different factions in the area, gang violence, problems between older and younger generations, and malicious gossip about and within Brixton. Discrimination is seen to be the most difficult aspect of life in Brixton. As we shall go on to see, racism towards non-white people and prejudice towards people from-Brixton pervade the everyday experiences of many in the study. While most of those who spoke about this were black, there are exceptions. A young Vietnamese girl, for example, said that:

Dee: Sometimes people cuss about the clothes you wear, like say you are wearing traditional clothes, some people cuss about what you wear, and what you look like, and where you are from, things like that, and sometimes they mimic your language, how you speak, but it’s not all like that.

There are a few young black boys whose accounts of Brixton focused almost completely on their experience of racism. One 13 year old boy, Malcolm, gave examples of the racist insults he had received, such as “monkey”, his feeling of being criminalised by the police and by shopkeepers, and how people “look at you funny” if you are black and from Brixton. Unlike most insiders, he made no positive points about Brixton. Other

difficulties spoken about are cultural conflicts between different ethnic groups, other forms of prejudice, such as homophobia and individualism.

There are also features of Brixton about which people have mixed feelings. For example, many distinguish between different parts of the area. Some agree that one region called Angel Town should be called “Devil Town” (Tara) because it is “one of the baddest places in Brixton” (Pauline). In contrast others emphasise its sports facilities (Dean) and the neighbourhood feel of Angel Town (Cliff) and say that people who use the term “Devil Town” are “just ignorant, really ignorant people” (Danielle). Examples of other issues which are evaluated both positively and negatively are religious groups (adding warmth and tolerance, or contributing to divisions in the community), the different experiences of girls and boys in Brixton (boys suffering racism more than girls, or girls suffering both racism and sexism more than boys), and the crowded nature of Brixton (making it noisy and stressful, or making it fun and exciting).

### 1.3. Perceptions of Brixton

When children seek to establish distance from Brixton they position themselves as observers of the community, not directly involved or knowledgeable about the area. They discuss Brixton’s reputation: how Brixton is perceived by those who do not identify with the community. Those who locate themselves outside of Brixton in neighbouring communities often draw on the discourse of reputation. There are a few, however, who do live in Brixton but who do not identify themselves as ‘Brixtonites’ and use this narrative strategy to distance themselves from Brixton. Brixton is portrayed as a threat to other communities, and a threat to the imagined homogeneity of the wider society. Insiders are aware that outsiders “are afraid of the difference that Brixton has compared to them” (Mollie).

Brixton is so constituted by its difference to other areas, and this difference is maintained through institutions, such as schools, the police, and the media. All children mention the role of the media in developing to external representations of Brixton. Here, in the media, Brixtonites are described as hostile, criminal and mad. Some children stress that there are “too many wierdos in Brixton” (Jack), and give examples of

eccentric behaviour and dress. Maria and friends, for example, describe a semi-naked woman whom they had seen jogging in the streets. Interestingly, some insiders also talk about this same woman, but offer the story as an illustration that the people in Brixton “can just be their self, they can just carry on as they would like to carry on” (Vicky). Thus, the same story can either support a version of Brixton as abnormal or a version of Brixton as liberal. What is fascinating about this is that children are here describing the same objective reality, and interpreting it through the use of different representations in order to establish and defend different perspectives in relation to Brixton.

Another perception is that people from Brixton are very aggressive. Tim and his friends, for example, agree that “there is bad attitude” in Brixton, saying that “if you bump into someone, they will beat you up”. Insiders are well aware of this reputation, as are Jayna and Vicky, two black African-Caribbean girls:

Jayna: Brixton is just caring. People fail to realise that though. They think that Brixton is bad. All you do when you go to Brixton: people get shot, there is always fights, everyone smokes dope, drugs. It's not like that. You don't know that way it is -

Vicky: - until you live there, you can't say what it is, just because of what you hear or read in the paper, or whatever.

This shows that outsiders’ perceptions of Brixton are known to those connected with the area whether they agree with them or not. Those children who do not identify with Brixton present these descriptions as the way Brixton ‘is’. Children who call themselves Brixtonites, present these descriptions as the misinformed, ignorant and biased views of others. These form a dominant representation of Brixton as ‘Bad’. Knowing about this representation, and being able to describe it in detail, is not the same thing as endorsing it. Acknowledging different perspectives on Brixton involves considering the consequences of social representations.

#### 1.4. Consequences of divergent perspectives

The findings described thus far show how the split between ‘explanations’ and ‘perceptions’ is more than a coding device. It is, in itself, a reality of living in Brixton. Those within Brixton are well aware that outsiders have a different understanding of Brixton from themselves, and they are painfully conscious, even as young as 12 years

old, that there are very high costs to facing the perceptions of others. While within Brixton, within the schools, homes and streets that offer them some security from the gaze of the outside world, they can embed themselves within the more affirming perspective of explanations. Leaving this security and facing the representations of the outside world, seen in the media and experienced in interaction with institutions such as the police and potential employers, can be traumatic. Meeting the representations of outsiders involves recognising a divergence in perspectives.

As I began to understand these different perspectives on Brixton, I realised that this three dimensional framework in part stemmed from, and in part extended, the theories of social representations, community and self-identity critically reviewed in Chapters Two and Four. The main three codes, therefore, explanations, perceptions and consequences, are conceptual rather than descriptive (Bryman and Burgess, 1983). The distinctiveness of a representation, an identity and even a community emerges through a recognition of difference. Developing a distinct community identity, for example, involves acknowledging the others' perceptions of that community and taking on and elaborating social representations of the community. It was in the process of analysis, in trying to understand the contradictions, absences and tensions in the data, that the theoretical framework of this thesis was developed. The literature I had already reviewed started me on this path; it was the data itself that gave the emerging theoretical framework substance.

The gaze of the external world on Brixton labels and disparages the area and those within it. Many insiders described how people “look down on you” (Dean), and how this makes them “feel sick” (Dee). The external representation of Brixton is a “label” (Tara) or a “stamp” (Louise) that marks them as “scum” (Danielle). This has many consequences for the community - in terms of making friends, joining sports teams, experiences within local shops, employment opportunities and interactions with the police, for example. We shall go on to see in Part II of the thesis how social representations of outsiders can have profound consequences on the self-consciousness and self-esteem of children and adults in Brixton.

## 2. The Analysis of Representations

Before one begins research “one cannot know, in advance, either the form or the content of the social representations that will emerge from one’s investigation” (Farr, 1993, p. 20). It is in the process of data collection, in inter-views and focus groups, for example, that the researcher may begin to understand the emerging social representations. It is in the course of analysis, however, that the researcher must uncover both the content and the structure of these representations.

### 2.1. The search for social representations

In order to establish where one may find social representations, we have to reconsider what they are. This definition from Jodelet (1991) is useful:

As phenomena, social representations present themselves under various forms, more or less complex. Images that condense manifold meanings, systems of reference that allow people to interpret what is happening, and, indeed, give meaning to the unexpected; categories which serve to classify circumstances, phenomena and individuals with whom we deal; theories which permit us to establish facts about them. When we consider social representations embedded in the concrete reality of our social life, they are all the above together.

In coding qualitative data all social researchers will find and describe common theories, relatively consistent categories, central systems of reference and key images that re-occur across most units of analysis. What the social representations researcher discusses are ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ aspects of social representations. When does a common theory become the core of a representation? When do associated categories become the periphery? These are questions that all researchers in the field of social representations have to tackle. Considering this, it is remarkable that there is not more written on the technicalities of the analysis of representations.

In this study I have found two dominant representations of Brixton. First, there is Brixton as a diverse community, which is described in depth using material mainly from focus groups and inter-views in Chapter Six. Second, there is Brixton as Bad, which is illustrated in Chapter Seven in the course of exploring the relationship between representations in everyday discourse (as discovered in the focus groups and inter-views) and representations in the media (as discovered in the documentary). These images, diversity and badness, are not incompatible; in some respects they are highly

interrelated. For example, the representation of diversity can be manipulated to support a version of Brixton as a strange, other and potentially dangerous community. Diverse can equate to threatening, and threatening is essentially 'bad' or other.

Social representations are mobile and constantly elaborated, extended and re-shaped to fit the perspectives of those developing them (Jodelet, 1991). This means that even hegemonic representations can be reformulated in different ways. Sometimes the representations 'diverse' and 'bad' are construed in ways that conflict. Some representations of diversity support a version of Brixton as a tolerant and caring community. This obviously jars with a representation of people in Brixton as aggressive, violent and frightening which stems from deeply pervasive ideologies that link blackness and badness. The consequences of the interrelationships between the two dominant representations are discussed in Chapter Eight.

The central images, diversity and badness, were found in all sources of data: interviews, focus groups, participant-observation and media analysis. Hence, core and peripheral aspects of the representations emerged in both discursive and iconic forms, as is common in this type of analysis (Wagner, 1998). Ideas in everyday discourse, in inter-view transcripts and in a television programme are conveyed, understood and challenged symbolically (Duveen and Lloyd, 1993). This means that the social representations researcher has to uncover these symbols embedded within different media - text, talk, images, and practices (Bauer and Gaskell, 1999). Searching for the same social representation of a culturally significant object in different types of media is a valuable use of triangulation (Flick, 1992). Finding the same categories, the same relationships between categories, and the same patterns between categories and perspectives across different media is evidence of a relatively coherent social representation. Both the content of a representation and its structure can be verified in this way. Chapter Seven, which examines the representation of Brixton as Bad in both the narratives of children who live in the area and in the images presented in the media, contains many examples of this.

## 2.2. Fragments and wholes

Within the descriptions and pictures of Brixton that I have collected there are contradictions, silences and ‘pieces’ of knowledge that make sense only in relation to each other. That is, each unit of analysis, whether a focus group, inter-view, documentary or observed encounter, presents a complex mosaic of competing and incomplete representations. It is the job of the researcher to piece these fragments together, as a three-dimensional and mobile jigsaw, to find out how each part of the story relates to information gathered elsewhere, and so to form a more comprehensive picture of the object of study.

How, one may ask, does the researcher ‘know’ when these fragments constitute a whole? When the narrators begin to repeat the same representational forms used by others, she can conclude that they are drawing on the same representations and that her data contain elements of these. She can now piece these fragments together, by uncovering patterns. She needs to look for what images and categories appear and re-appear in different texts, images and practices, what parts are ‘always there’ and what parts change as a response to the particular features of the interaction - the context, culture, time and participant-observers. In this way, the core and the periphery are established (as discussed in Chapter Two). The table below restates this distinction.

For example, in my research, social representations of black people have emerged as central to understanding representations of Brixton. Sentiments and experiences of the children in the study echo wider racist discourses documented in a range of historical, anthropological, sociological and non-academic sources (e.g. Jahoda, 1999; Ferguson, 1998; Gilroy, 1987). These illustrate the relative coherence and rigidity of the core of hegemonic representations over centuries of white supremacy (MalcolmX, 1965) and, at the same time, demonstrate the contextual and adaptive qualities of their peripheral elements. Hence, similar studies to mine, such as Back’s (1996) research on multicultural identities in South London and Ryan’s (1999) study of identity and representation in a multiethnic school in Canada, confirm the resilience of certain representations, or, more precisely, support specific forms of the same representation, and, simultaneously, highlight the particularities of my findings. Within my own study,



the comparison of different representational forms found in different focus groups, for example, debated by different groups of adolescents, confirms the coherence of the representations ‘Brixton as Diverse’ and ‘Brixton as Bad’ while revealing their variability and heterogeneity. Hence, the researcher of social representations has to develop an eye for both the detail and for the generalisability of their subject. How is this achievable?

CORE	PERIPHERY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relatively consensual and rigid</li> <li>• Tied to the collective memory and the history of the community</li> <li>• Defines the homogeneity of the community</li> <li>• Relatively stable across contexts</li> <li>• Generates the significance of representation</li> <li>• Establishes organisation of representation</li> <li>• Connects variance within the periphery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relatively flexible; bears contradictions</li> <li>• Permits the integration of individual experiences and past histories</li> <li>• Supports the heterogeneity of the community</li> <li>• Sensitive to the immediate context</li> <li>• Allows adaptation to concrete reality</li> <li>• Allows content differentiation</li> <li>• Protects the central nucleus from circumstantial transformations</li> </ul>
<p>Adapted from</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Abric (1993) Central system, peripheral system: their function and roles in the dynamic of social representations. In <i>Papers in Social Representations</i>, 2, (2), pp. 75 – 789</li> <li>2. Pereira de Sá (1996) Determining the Central Nucleus of Social Representations. In <i>Papers in Social Research Methods</i>; Qualitative series produced by Methodology Institute, London School of Economics</li> </ol>	

### 2.3. Using *Nud\*ist* for the study of social representations

Unfortunately social representations are not simply presented to the researcher in the interview, neatly organised into core and periphery. After the painstaking work of transcribing and coding all focus group data, for example, one is still left with an amazingly complex mosaic of the research topic. I found the qualitative analysis computer programme *Nud\*ist* extremely useful in making sense of this complexity. *Nud\*ist* stands for “non-numerical, unstructured data indexing, searching and theorising” (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd, 1997, p. 2). From my point of view there are two main advantages to *Nud\*ist*. First, it offers the capacity to deal with a

huge quality of interrelated categories 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, more possible and more precise (Richards and Richards, 1983).

In my project, for example, I have over 300 cross-referenced categories containing 70 images (photographs taken by the children, stills from the television documentary, and pictures from other media) and over 7000 text units (paragraphs of text given by the same speaker). Using computer assisted methods I was able to code the same text unit or image in multiple nodes if, for example, it referred to a variety of issues, dual perspectives or if a section of text was co-constructed by different speakers. I found another computer programme, *Decision Explorer*, useful in providing the means of displaying complex coding frames clearly without losing the detail of the analysis. The coding trees in Appendix I illustrate this visually. Take this section of text from a mixed focus group with young, white and black girls:

Caroline: So, people who live in Brixton, they want to be -

Louise: - black

Danielle: - mixed in with the area.

Katrina: The black people in Brixton, the little, not the little ones, but the teenagers and all that, yeah, always trying to wear the latest thing and all that, and all these girls try bussing it with these tight trousers. And this woman she died her hair green. Everyone in Brixton wants to stand out from everyone else.

Pauline: If you think that is bad, I saw this woman with purple, yellow, green, blue extensions!

Sam: I saw a man with a kilt on in Brixton!

Katrina: I saw a man, I saw a man -

Danielle: - want to stand out

In this section there are 8 text units. *Nud\*ist* allows that each unit can be coded in an unlimited number of different categories while retaining its original position in the transcript. This means that the complete sense of the focus group is not lost when

'cutting and pasting' themes across different transcripts. For example, the text in the section above has been coded in 27 categories. Eighteen of these give information about the speakers (gender, age, skin-colour, school, group dynamics, affiliation to Brixton, for example), eight code the content in different nodes stemming from the three main categories of explanations, perceptions and consequences (diversity, black-white, youth, Brixton people, reputation, the threat of difference, self-respect and the gaze of others) and one category codes the section in a free-standing node (these often being where I coded methodological concerns). At any point one can 'spread' the analysis to review text units before and after these given, study the whole transcript, explore linked categories, and examine the consistency of any speaker across the whole transcript. While each utterance is a single text unit, to analyse each separately would empty out social meaning and dislocate it from the broader story being co-constructed by these girls. *Nud\*ist* allows that the richness of the data is not sacrificed in the quest for manageable data sets, nor that exceptions to common patterns are lost in the search for clear conclusions.

In the investigation of social representations, *Nud\*ist* has enormous advantages. As the programme creators have said, *Nud\*ist* encourages "the creation of new categories for thinking about the data, rethinking and reordering of old ones, the recording of emerging ideas and exploration of their relationships and their links with the data" (Richards and Richards, 1983, p. 170). The analysis of a social phenomenon like social representations, which are dynamic, contextual and highly complex, acquires the precision, breadth and flexibility that *Nud\*ist* can offer. The stable and coherent aspects of a central theme (the core) can be coded alongside aspects of the same theme that are more flexible, contradictory and dependent on individual experiences and inter-group dynamics. This means that the core of a representation can be analysed across speakers, across transcripts and even across forms of data - text, talk and image, for example. This generates the significance of the representation and determines its organisation. The peripheral elements of the representation also can be coded. These allow for the adaptation of the central theme to the concrete reality of different participants and explain content differentiation across the whole data set. In this way the representation is explored and coded, both on the micro level of individual experiences and the

heterogeneity of different groups, and the macro level of historical and cultural trends and social values (see table summarising the central nucleus theory, given above).

Using *Nud\*ist* in this way allows for the building of theory in the process of analysis. For instance, in the process of coding and re-coding the data, I realised that black boys had a very different experience of Brixton from others in the study. This is especially so for young, black boys living in the centre of Brixton. Because it is possible to place each of the 44 adolescents in the study in many different categories, finding intricate patterns is no difficult or time-consuming task within *Nud\*ist*. I developed a table of the different characteristics of each participant that was extremely useful in such fine-tuned analysis. Particularly valuable were the matrix tables that *Nud\*ist* produced conveying which kind of people, in which kind of focus group, were likely to talk about what topics (see Appendix I for an illustration).

Such detailed analysis allowed for complex patterns to be tested and assessed in a variety of conditions (see Appendix I for examples of this). Many questions could be asked of the data: Did older children understand the issues differently? What issues were avoided in groups where the dynamics seemed tense? When did children directly ask me about my experience? What type of topics provoked argument and anger? When was humour used? If children did not say very much in the group, what did they speak about? What became obvious through its absence?

Through examining the emerging social representations with the detail and precision of *Nud\*ist* it was possible to test and develop the theoretical assumptions presented thus far in the thesis. The theory of social representations guided the analysis in terms of how to make sense of the data. Theories of identity (Tajfel, 1982), self-categorisation (Turner, 1987), self-consciousness (Mead, 1934) and the role of the other in identity construction (Hall, 1986) have all contributed to the process of analysis. As far as possible I have examined how the research material reflected, elaborated and challenged these theories. In this sense, my analysis is not grounded in the strictest Glaser and Strauss (1967) sense. The theories of my discipline which discuss the issues that have emerged in my research have motivated the course of my analysis. Hence, this is a study

in “motivated ethnography” as Lloyd and Duveen describe (1992, p. 43). It is appropriate, I believe, that a doctorate of philosophy should start from the theoretical basis of its discipline and return to offer a contribution to the discipline in its conclusions.

### 3. Insiders, Neighbours and Outsiders

Communities are defined not only by relations between members, among whom there is similarity, but also by the relations between these ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, who are distinguished by their difference and consequent exclusions (Crow and Allen, 1994, p. 7).

What became immediately apparent in the early stages of analysis was that different people related to Brixton in different ways. While all those in the study demonstrated some degree of flexibility in positioning themselves in relation to Brixton, most established a more-or-less consistent identity as either *from-Brixton* or *not-from-Brixton*. All those in this study live in the general vicinity of Brixton and, for the most part, were considered by their teachers to live ‘in Brixton’. As there are no physical boundaries to Brixton it is not possible to define objectively who is from Brixton and who is not. As I explained in Chapter Two, Brixton is not a political ward or geographical region in its own right; there are no clear boundaries that one can find on a map to determine whether an address falls within the Brixton area or not. Brixton’s borders are, therefore, symbolic rather than material. What differentiates it from adjoining areas are the social representations that people have of it.

Therefore, identifying with Brixton is more of a social psychological dilemma than a matter to be decided by physical locations. Given the negative reputation that Brixton has in wider society, it is not surprising, then, that only a proportion of children identify with Brixton.<sup>2</sup> In seeking to explain this, I do not wish to fix or restrict the situational and temporal nature of self-identity. Rather, I wish to examine the dialectic between representations of the community and community identities by looking at the general patterns that have emerged in this particular study.

### 3.1. Identifying with the community.

When asked where they were from, over half the children, twenty-five out of forty-four, said “Brixton”. This proportion identified with the area in positioning themselves as active participants in the community. They referred to shared experiences of ‘our’ community, and spoke from the position of ‘we’ or ‘us’. Because they, themselves, offer their knowledge from the position of the ‘insider’, and referred to themselves as ‘Brixtonites’, I refer to these children as Brixtonites or as insiders. Their understanding of Brixton comes from their experiences of living, shopping, working, going to school and simply ‘hanging out’ in the area. They spoke of their familiarity with, security in and pride of, 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

### 3.2 Strangers to Brixton

Obviously there are many people who know little or nothing about Brixton. Such people would live outside of the area, probably outside of London altogether. Naturally I did not expect to find any such strangers to Brixton in Brixton’s schools. I was, therefore, surprised to find one little girl, Jill, who had no affiliation with Brixton and knew very little of the area. She had just moved to England with her family and had only been in the school a few days before participating in the focus group. Although she said that she didn’t “know anything about Brixton”, her hesitant comments and embarrassed silences were none-the-less revealing. Hence, I included her in the analysis. Towards the end of her focus group, after there had been much discussion of the consideration that people in Brixton have for each other, she gave us her first impressions of the area:

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<sup>2</sup> Classically in social psychology this issue has been handled by distinguishing between reference group and membership group (Hyman and Singer, 1968). This was also linked to the issue of false consciousness in Marxist theory (Althusser, 1984).

Jill: As we were driving through London and, um, getting to our house, and my brother kept on - he's only 8, and he kept saying 'Look at all the coloured people! God, there are loads of them!' Cos in Wales there are only white people. We came round and we saw loads of coloured people and we thought we looked around and we thought they all looked really friendly. Cos like, we saw someone, um, drop something out of their handbag and someone picked it up for them, so it looked really, really friendly.

In subscribing to a particular version of Brixton, which she backs up with personal experience, she is positioning herself in relation to others in the focus group, and in Brixton more generally. By offering the positive interpretation that Brixton is “really, really friendly”, she aligns herself with insiders in the group who have previously presented similar narratives. However, a representation of black people as threatening is also implicit here, in her little brother’s comment “God, there are loads of them!” Even the stranger, therefore, has a position in relation to Brixton.

In my on-going participant-observation of Brixton I met many people who had never visited Brixton. Nearly all of these, even many overseas, in Italy, Spain and Mexico, for example, had an opinion on Brixton. For the most part this was based on what they had read and seen in the media. Often these outsiders connected Brixton to a history of rioting and to a large black population (Piper, 1996). For the most part, their representations were disparaging of the area and those who live there.

### 3.3. Vacating Brixton

Other children in the study explained that they were from areas bordering Brixton, such as Streatham, Clapham and Stockwell. 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 some of these children live in what their teachers consider to be Brixton, they are careful to assert that they are *not*-from-Brixton. In this way, they establish distance from Brixton. In his study of young people in a similar area of South London, Back (1996) found the same process “whereby individuals distance themselves from a particular social definition” (p.125). He has called this ‘vacating’.

In some senses people who vacate a Brixtonite identity could be seen to be outsiders to Brixton. However, this would distort the dynamics of identity construction. It is not as simple as dividing the children into insiders and outsiders. Brixton's reputation extends far beyond its symbolic borders. Social representations about Brixton perpetuated in dominant discourses are more coherent, more robust and more denigrating than ideas about nearby areas, for example Oval or Streatham. As a result areas close to Brixton are partially constructed through and against representations of Brixton. Because of the ambiguity as to where exactly Brixton begins and ends, it is difficult to place who is and who is not a 'Brixtonite'. Children who live and go to school in the general locality of Brixton but do not claim a Brixtonite identity maintain this difference with conviction and vigilance.

In constantly asserting their difference, ironically, these children are still deeply connected to Brixton. Thus, they are too intimately linked to Brixton to be considered 'outsiders'. Because of their ambivalent association and because they generally live on the outskirts of the area, I have called them 'neighbours'. Symbolically, and sometimes literally, they live 'next-door' to Brixton. Thus, neighbours are those who, collectively, distance themselves from the area and thus from consequences of negative social representations of Brixton. While insiders maintain that their understanding of the area is supported by their direct experience of living in Brixton, neighbours stress that their knowledge of Brixton comes from limited participation. These girls, for example, one Chinese and one Muslim, in different focus groups, position themselves as not-from-Brixton:

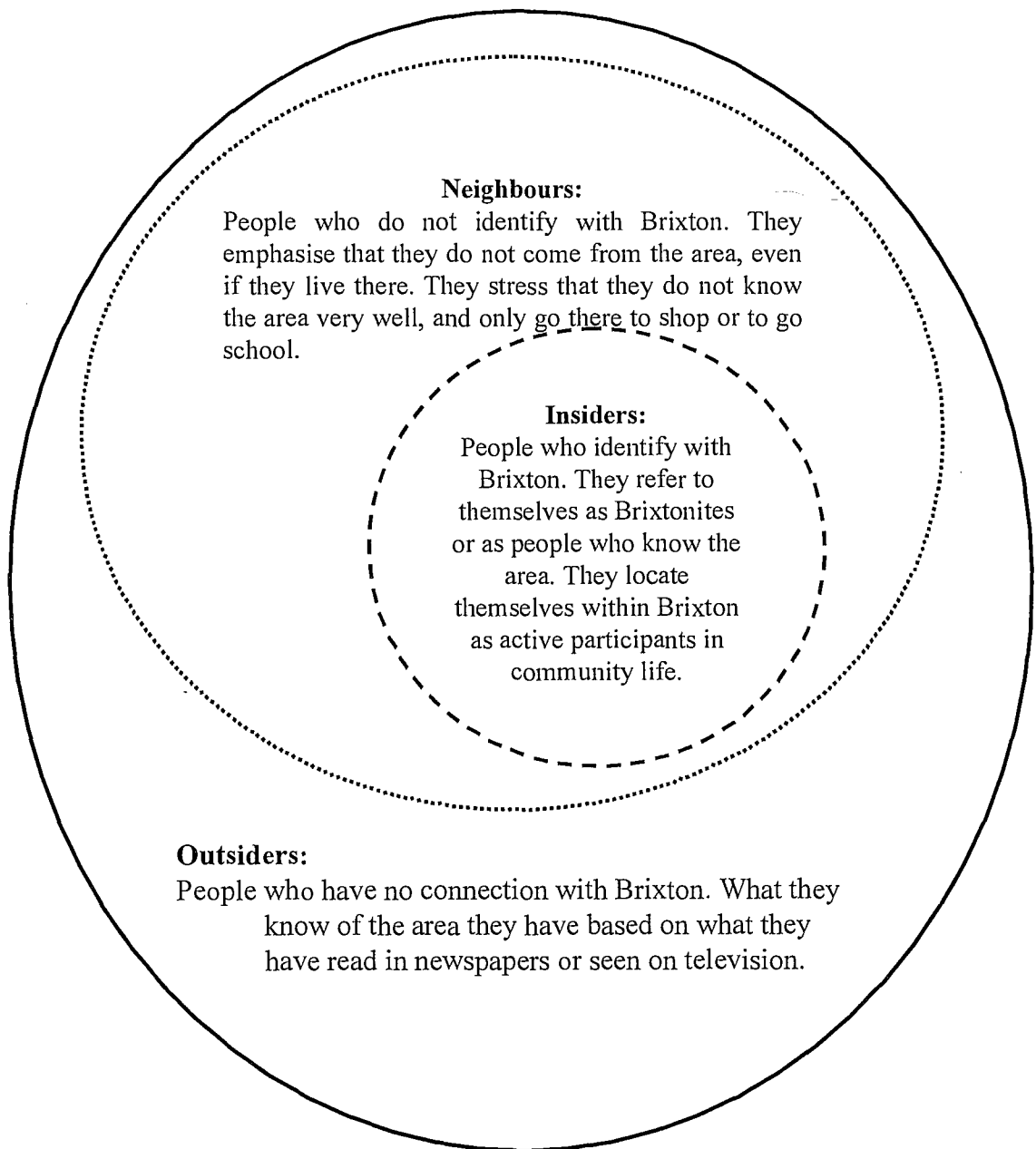
Lesa: I think it's (Brixton) all right. Good for shopping. I don't know what it is like to live there though.

Samia: I like Brixton. And I like the leisure centre there, and I like the shops and everything, but I must admit I won't want to go to Brixton by myself and especially at night.

Somewhat simplistically perhaps, we can visualise the differences between insiders, outsiders and neighbours, as I have illustrated in the diagram below. Insiders are obviously those who position themselves in the heart of Brixton. Outsiders are those who have no or little connection with the area. Neighbours fall inbetween. What is



crucial to remember is that the boundaries between each category are permeable and negotiable. In some ways the distinction between neighbour and insider is clearer than the distinction between neighbour and outsider. As we shall go on to see, neighbours and outsiders draw on the same representations in similar ways, while insiders manipulate these representations in quite different ways in order to establish and defend an identity of which they can be proud.



## 4. The Situational Nature of Identities

This distinction between insiders, outsiders and neighbours is analytically very useful. However, it must be emphasised that, as with many social categorisations, there are variations and exceptions to the main trends (Billig, 1988). As Back (1996) has stated, the “process of inhabiting and vacating social identities manifests itself daily in adolescent peer relationships” (p. 125), and other social relationships. People claim, develop and reject certain identities as a consequence of many things. In this study, address, gender, ethnicity, and skin-colour, as well as the particular dynamics of focus groups, all affect what kind of relationships are formed within Brixton.

Generally the children maintain a reasonably coherent identity. That is, more or less consistently, they position themselves as insiders or neighbours for the course of a focus group. However, as I have already described, a perspective is an objective point in space/time (Mead, 1934). This means that it is the position that the speaker chooses in a particular point in the focus group. All of the children in all of the focus groups use both perspectives of ‘explanations’ and ‘perceptions’ and draw on both representations ‘Brixton is Diverse’ and ‘Brixton is Bad’. What differs is the extent to which they do this. All children use one perspective most of the time. Some are better able to switch from speaking as a participant to speaking as an observer.

### 4.1. The influence of the group

While group dynamics do not determine the identity of participants, they have considerable influence on what is said, and how insistently versions are defended (Morgan, 1988). In all-insider groups the participants can afford to be more flexible in considering different versions of Brixton. When in a mixed (insider-neighbour) focus group, insiders tend to challenge the stigmatising representations that neighbours have of them. If they are to maintain a positive self-identity and a positive representation of where they live, they need to call this stigma into question.

The versions of Brixton constructed in the all-neighbour group drew heavily on the representation of badness, with little reference to diversity. These versions were the most disparaging of both Brixton and its population. As other studies on identity have

found, people “who lack an internal sense of commitment to the group, ... may be tempted to distance themselves from the group or even ‘put down’ other in-group members” (Branscombe *et al*, 1999, p. 39). The boys in this focus group certainly did ‘put down’ people who come from the area. As I have explained above, it is imperative that neighbours create distance between themselves and Brixton. However, as one of them lives in the centre of Brixton and the others in the focus group live close-by, this strategy 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.

While I have stressed the differences between perspectives, it should be clear that it is not a simple matter of different respondents using one representation in favour of the other. Insiders and neighbours are both clearly aware that there are competing versions of Brixton. At different times, in different focus groups, regardless of which narrative strategy they adopt, they all exploit both representations to defend and contest the way they are re-presented. On the whole insiders in both ‘all insider’ and in ‘neighbour-insider’ focus groups draw on the social representation ‘Brixton as Diverse’ in co-constructing a version of Brixton as multicultural and tolerant. This is not to say, however, that they reject the representation ‘Brixton as Bad’ or neighbours’ versions of a tense and divided area. For example, like neighbours, insiders explain that they have personally experienced racism in Brixton. For example these two young girls, one Ghanaian, one Vietnamese, describe:

Grace: Sometimes people like cuss people from other countries.

Dee: Sometimes people call me Chinese and all that kind of stuff, but I don't really take it seriously, because sometimes they are just joking around, and I usually joke with them. But sometimes it's really bad. Like most of the times I see a lot of white people they usually cuss black people for some reason. And sometimes I see black people cussing white people, but not as much as white people cussing black. ... But you know it's not all racists, in Brixton.

While insiders maintain that racism is more commonly experienced in establishing relationships with those outside of Brixton, they admit that cultural diversity can lead to difficulties, principally across generations. One of the school-heads explained that the pupils in her school “have conflicts with their parents or grandparents”. She continued:

SH2: I think they do (conflict) because it's very different. I mean obviously you can't generalise, but particularly the children who live with grandparents, or grandparents (who) have a grip, have a lot to do with them. There is a very different expectation of the relationship between parents and children and authority and younger people. ... But I think that does bring them into conflict, yeah. Um, in different ways.

What was encouraging was that some young people in all groups felt that such conflicts were often the result of increased tolerance on the part of younger generations. Insiders drew on the social representation of a diverse community to support this. When in all-insider groups they stressed that, in their opinion, the experience of living with difference and of accepting different ways of thinking and believing, make the young of Brixton more open-minded than their elders. People in multicultural areas “have learned to live together”, according to a respondent in Back’s (1996) study of South London communities (p. 121). The British-Chinese and black British adolescents in both all-insider and mixed groups felt that they were more accepting of difference than their parents or grandparents. They explained how this could cause some tension within the home:

Ien: I think that it is more likely (that) in the older generation (as) they will start - tend to stick to their own culture, or people from the same country. But our generation we mix with anyone. We don't have discrimination against any other race.

Intra-community tensions are seen as the teething problems of a community learning to recognise and to celebrate its diversity. Teachers and children attribute cultural prejudices within the area to inter-community relations and generational differences. In identifying with Brixton insiders challenge neighbours’ version of a divided and threatening area, and manipulate the social representations of Brixton as Diverse and Brixton as Bad in order to protect their self-esteem. The peripheral elements of the representation Brixton as Diverse are intertwined with elements of the representation of Brixton as Bad in such a way as to strengthen and to promote their identities as Brixtonites. Together insiders co-construct a version of Brixton and of themselves as culturally tolerant and respectful. This was especially evident in insider-neighbour

groups, where insiders defended their identity against the stigmatising representations of neighbours.

#### 4.2. Conflict in the group

When in an all-insider or an all-neighbour focus group, both versions could be discussed without the threat of serious controversy. However, in neighbour-insider groups, conflict between the different representations 'Brixton as Diverse' and 'Brixton as Bad' quickly became apparent. For example, while all insiders generally supported a positive version of their community, it was when challenged by neighbours' disparaging versions that insiders asserted this most vehemently. Take this extract from a mixed focus group where there is some discussion as to whether Brixton is black or mixed. Samia, a Muslim neighbour asserts that Brixton is black, while three black or 'white and black' insiders insist that it is 'mixed':

Samia: Like there is a lot of black people. I'm not being racist but the majority of people - they are black.

Tara: I don't understand, yeah. I keep saying, when I think of Brixton I keep seeing a mix of people, you see a mix!

Riva: You do see a mix a lot!

Tara: I see black, white, Chinese, Asian, everything! I see everything!

Frances: People say that Brixton is majority black people; I think it is probably the most mixed place in England. Not like when you go to Tooting, and you just see, you can count the amount of black people on one hand, or something like that. But 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.

The emotion with which these points are made are lost in the transcription of data. From the textual presentation of this exchange, Frances' point and Samia's point may seem similar. However, observing this discussion, hearing the anger and passion in their voices and feeling the tension in the group, confirmed my analysis that Samia's position as a neighbour threatens insiders' versions of Brixton and so too of themselves. In other mixed focus groups there is more heated debate as to the nature of Brixton. The representation of aggressive people living in a rough and dirty place clashes with the representation of open-minded and benevolent people living in a multicultural

community. Here, in this extract, an insider, Danielle, challenges neighbours' disparaging versions of Brixton:

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 neighbours of this group, Sam, Louise and Pauline, paint a very different picture of Brixton from that held by insiders. Like outsiders they draw on stigmatising representations of Brixton as black and emphasise the danger and threat of Brixton. Danielle, an insider, is aware that these representations damage the community and threaten Brixtonites' self-esteem. At different points in the focus group she tries to undermine the denigrating and stigmatising representations of neighbours. After neighbours in the focus group told several stories about mad or criminal people in Brixton, 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 teacher, 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. Insiders are aware that others' representations of Brixton may stigmatise their community, and hence, threaten their identities (Breakwell, 1983). Children such as Danielle have the skill and the representational resources to contest stigma and to demand Brixton be recognised as a tolerant and harmonious community. This does far more than create a pleasant picture of

their area: through positively identifying with Brixton such children achieve self-confidence and self-respect.

Explaining the role of group dynamics in the use of social representations and the defence of different identities demonstrates, I believe, the value of focus groups in the study of social representations. It is when there is a divergence in perspective, when shared meanings conflict with individual meanings, and when the explanations of insiders conflict with the perceptions of neighbours, that the dialectical nature of social representations and of the situational nature of identities becomes apparent. Insiders need only clarify the nature of where they live when challenged by others. They are better able to consider the validity of neighbours' impressions of Brixton, and so admit the difficulties of living in the area, when neighbours are not present to confirm these representations of Brixton. Thus, when their version of Brixton is challenged by denigrating accounts from neighbours, insiders are all the more insistent on the benefits of living in Brixton. Thus, identifying with Brixton is directed, in part, by group dynamics. Another significant influence on the co-construction of community identities is one's home address.

#### 4.3. Address and identity

Generally those who live in central Brixton often locate themselves as experts on life in Brixton and so identify as insiders in Brixton. In this study, out of the 24 children who live in the centre of Brixton, 20 strongly identify with the area. There are also a few children who live in the adjoining regions who positively identify with Brixton. This is because the social representations of Brixton pervade the social construction of these other areas. There are girls and boys in Stockwell and Clapham, for example, who use the representation of a tolerant and vibrant community to assert a positive identity for themselves. Take this quote from Tara who lives in Stockwell:

Tara: I know Brixton I can say 'yeah, it's a mixture and it's all right', 'it's all right', don't personally live there, but me mum goes to the market all the time. When you know people, it's like a family, it's like an environment where you know everybody.

Four other children in the study also live on the borders of Brixton and yet speak from the perspective of an expert and a participant. For these reasons I have classified them as

insiders as they collectively identify with Brixton in strongly defending their version of Brixton over and against the stigmatising representations of others.

In contrast, the other children who live on the periphery of Brixton distance themselves from Brixton by adopting the narrative strategy of ‘perceptions’. In doing so they establish and defend an identity as neighbours. Out of the 20 children who live on the outskirts of Brixton, 15 reject association with the area. Again there are a few exceptions to the rule: there are 4 children living in the centre of Brixton who also reject any association with Brixton. These children take on and use the negative representations of Brixton prevalent in the media and apply them to where they live and, at times, to themselves. Their depiction of Brixton is often more disparaging than those of other neighbours who live further away from Brixton. This shows that “familiarity need not reduce contempt” as Goffman has noted (1968, p. 70). Neighbours who live in central Brixton have to develop distance between themselves and Brixton. One way of doing this is to denigrate the area. Theo, a Nigerian boy who lives in the centre of Brixton, for example, says that “the problem with Brixton is the people that live there”. This boy suggests that “they need to change the people” to improve Brixton. Does this, one wonders, include himself?

The children who position themselves as insiders very often are black or “white and black” (Kesi) in skin-colour. Children who describe themselves as white or brown are less likely to see themselves as Brixtonites. Hence white British children and Asian children are more likely to distance themselves from Brixton. However, girls of all skin-colours and ethnicities are more likely to identify with Brixton than are boys. Obviously these are general patterns that have many exceptions. To understand the relationship between other identities, such as white, female and British, for example, and the development of an identity in relation to Brixton, we need to examine social representations of Brixton. The content of these representations both confirms and conflicts with different aspects of these other identities. To analyse the relationship between different identities, therefore, we have to turn to the content of representations. This is the aim of Part II.



## In conclusion

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, non-contractual or “imperative” aspects of identity (e.g. Duveen, forthcoming), are likely to provoke accusations of essentialism (Fuss, 1990). To many contemporary social theorists, criticism can hardly be more damning. However, as I hope I have shown, there are limits to how far we can opt in and out of identities. “What is more”, Ryan (1999) has observed, “these parameters are not something the individual invents” (p. 146). However one makes sense of 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, I argued in Chapter Four, makes these identities unavoidable. In some senses, therefore, identities are imposed onto us.

Children who live in the area of Brixton, I have demonstrated in the present chapter, have to develop an identity in relation to Brixton. Because they are associated with Brixton, they have to locate themselves either as insiders or as neighbours. The complexities of the insider-neighbour distinction illustrate the intricacies and complexities of the concept ‘perspective’. I have extended Mead’s definition of a perspective as an objective point in space/time from which events are viewed (Mead, 1967). I use the term to mean a collectively negotiated objective point in space/time from which events are collectively viewed. That is, by adopting different narratives strategies, by speaking from the perspective of perceptions or explanations, people are able to establish and defend different identities in relation to Brixton. This means that insiders and neighbours are not positions cut in stone and rigidly tied to the particular individuals in the study. They are locations that people negotiate in interaction with others.

Perspectives are situational and temporal positions that people negotiate in relation to Brixton. These, I have explained in this chapter, emerged from the process of analysis. Through the use of *Nud\*ist* I was able to examine the two main perspectives in relation to Brixton, explanations and perceptions, and so explore the meeting of these

perspectives, that is the consequences of divergent perspectives. Analysing the detail of these three coding categories revealed the content and the structure of two dominant social representations: Brixton as Diverse and Brixton as Bad.

Different children in the study draw on these representations in different ways to assert and defend an identity as either from-Brixton or as not-from-Brixton. At different points in the focus groups they adopt different perspectives on Brixton, and manipulate social representations in order to maintain their self-identity. The dynamics of the focus group as well as the actual address of the children influenced how readily different versions of Brixton were considered. It is when different perspectives meet and conflict, that we can see the particular significance of each perspective. Divergence in perspective brings forth difference between both competing representations and identities. It is only through analysing divergent perspectives that the particularity of self-identities, of social representations and of communities can be adequately studied. Hence divergence of perspectives should be a central aspect in any social psychological study (Heider, 1958). The interesting and useful question is, how do people cope with divergence in their everyday experiences. To tackle this we need to examine the case of Brixton in detail. It is to this that we can now turn.

## PART I: RESEARCHING THE COMMUNITY

### Conclusion

Thus far I have argued that the theory of social representations provides us with precise tools for a rigorously social psychological analysis of community. I have discussed both the absence of and the need for a social psychology of community in Chapter Two, *Theorising Community*, and concluded that it is the theory of social representations is best equipped to provide such an account of the social psychological significance of community. In Chapter Three, *Accessing the Community*, I have described the background of my study, introducing the reader to Brixton, and explaining my choice of methods and the value of difference in my research. In Chapter Four, *Identity in Whose Eyes?*, I highlighted the social psychological necessity of community, and importance of identity to the social psychology of community. I argue that a radically social account of identity, which highlights its intersubjective, temporal and situational basis, is essential to a social psychology of community. Finally, Chapter Five, *Analysing Divergent Perspectives*, reveals how the theories presented in Chapter Four are used in the analysis and have revealed the significance of different perspectives in relation to claiming community membership. Together these chapters illustrate how the social construction of communities can be systematically investigated through the theory of social representations. Part II examines puts the theoretical framework developed in Part I in a concrete setting. This demonstrates how social representations (a) make community life both possible and sustainable and (b) enable different versions of the same community to be imposed, developed and defended in the everyday activity of 'doing' community. From here we can consider the social psychological consequences of community living.

## PART II: THE COMMUNITY IN CONTEXT

### Introduction

Brixton exists in our inter-subjectively constructed realities as an object to recognise, to re-present and to live. As people come into contact with this community, on the News, in conversation, or actually being in the area, they take on and develop existing social representations of Brixton and make these representations their own. Brixton exists too as the physical place where people collectively pass on, develop and manipulate social representations. Brixton, as loved or hated home, as social environment, or as an area to avoid, is an object to embed in our symbolic worlds and imbue with particular meanings. Thus it is all those who live in the area, those who visit it and those who simply hear about it indirectly who construct social representations about the community. In this way, they contribute to the social construction of Brixton.

Part II examines this in detail. In Chapter Six, *Making Sense of Brixton's Diversity*, I show that the same social representation can be elaborated, defended and subverted to support different perspectives on Brixton. Insiders, for example, use the representation of Brixton as a diverse community to paint a picture of a culturally rich and tolerant community, while neighbours use this same representation to depict a divided and racist community. In Chapter Seven, *Brixton is Bad – Representation and Reality?*, I explore the role of the media in the social construction of a community. The analysis is enriched with questions of how stigma, dominant representations, racism, and power pervade social representations of Brixton. Finally, in Chapter Eight, *The Struggle for Recognition and Esteem*, narratives of outsider-insider encounters allows an examination of the consequences of stigmatising representations for self-consciousness and self-confidence. As we shall see, the struggle against stigma can both damage and empower the self-identities of children in Brixton. The story that unfolds here, in Part II, is of the particular realities of those living in the Brixton area. It is only through an understanding of the particular that we can consider the question of a social psychology of community.

## CHAPTER 6

### Making Sense of Brixton's Diversity

#### 1. Social Representations within Brixton

- 1.1 Brixton as Diverse
- 1.2 Divisions and alliances
- 1.3. Insiders' version: Cultural tolerance and respect
- 1.4. Neighbours' version: Intergroup tensions and racism

#### 2. The Nature of Brixtonites

- 2.1 Establishing difference
- 2.2 Stigmatising the community
- 2.3 Transcending stigma
- 2.4 Establishing identity

#### 3. The Significance of the Market

- 3.1 "Brixton caters for all"
- 3.2 "Brixton is pong!"
- 3.3 Animals and scavengers
- 3.4 Enjoying food, enjoying culture

This chapter examines a dominant social representation of Brixton: Brixton as a diverse community. When people discuss Brixton they draw on this representation in different ways. What I demonstrate here is how core and peripheral elements of the representation are used in the construction of competing versions of Brixton. Different people support different versions of Brixton as they locate themselves differently in relation to the area. This illustrates how social representations can be used to co-construct self-identity and difference. That is, through attaching certain meanings and evaluations to the representation, people locate themselves as members of this community, or they distance themselves from the community by denigrating Brixton. Social representations can be manipulated in order to marginalise and to stigmatise Brixton, and they can be used to contest versions of the area presented by more dominant others. The complex relationship between identity and social re-presentation is illustrated in this study of how people make sense of Brixton's diversity.

## 1. Social Representations within Brixton

Communities have to be recognised as such. They have to be meaningful and distinctive both for those living within them and for those outside of them. Not only do people co-construct the symbolic meaning of community, but they also need to establish a code both for sharing and for contesting such meanings (Moscovici, 1973). Communities attain this negotiated significance through the social representations that we have of them. Those living within an area that is recognised as a community use social representations of that area in constructing a simultaneously shared yet distinct identity. The symbolic meaning of a community establishes both what a group has in common and what differentiates the distinct members of that group (Cohen, 1995). In this chapter I examine how young people and teachers living in the general locality of Brixton make sense of where they live and go to school.

What this chapter explains is how young people use the same representations of Brixton in the maintenance of different identities. This explanation is mainly based on the material from seven focus groups with school children between the ages of 12 and 16, and supplemented with information provided by school-heads in one-to-one interviews (as detailed in Chapter Three). While all those interviewed live in the general locality of Brixton, there are differences in how they see themselves in relation to Brixton. Some people in the study support representations of Brixton that proclaim their difference and distance from the area. That is, they relate to Brixton as neighbours. Others use representations of Brixton as a way of claiming a common identity with others in the area. That is, they relate to Brixton as insiders.

Neighbours and insiders do not construct representations in separate communities and do not draw on separate representational fields. It is not a simple matter of 'internal' representations competing with 'external' representations, or in-groups and out-groups offering opposing versions of Brixton. Neighbours and insiders must share an understanding of Brixton - without which they would be unable to communicate and to participate in the same symbolic realities. Communities, I have claimed, need to be recognised. Communities are defined through the representations that others have of them. It is not as simple as communities adopting these representations without

qualification. Those who live in Brixton draw on the representations that others have of them: they extend them, alter them, and, at times, contradict them. Community members co-construct community identities riding on these social representations. Communities as well as individuals are capable of assuming the role of the other (Mead, 1934).

There is a dialectical relationship between insiders' and outsiders' representations of a particular community. In some ways they use the same representations to construct and define a community. As I illustrate below, the same social object can be re-presented in different ways, and so can support different versions of the world (Goodman, 1978) and different identities. The challenge for those living in the vicinity of Brixton, but particularly for insiders, is to confront the conflict and the contradictions between differing versions of Brixton. Insiders are aware that others' representations of Brixton may stigmatise their community, and hence, themselves. Some have the representational resources to either criticise or reject such stigma. Others, sadly, struggle to assert an alternative version of Brixton and, so, of themselves. This challenge, school children in the study explained, is a central aspect of everyday life in Brixton. The negotiation of social representations of Brixton constitutes the ongoing social construction of community.

Insiders and neighbours draw on two dominant social representations of Brixton: Brixton as Bad and Brixton as Diverse. These representations operate within the same representational field. That is, they attain their significance and their distinction only in relation to each other. At times, children use elements of both representations in a way that confirms and develops the representational field. At other times these representations emerge in the course of conversation in ways that conflict and contradict each other.

The representation of Brixton as a diverse community is common in all explanations of Brixton. It is a widely shared, easily manipulated and pervasive representation which includes ideas about multiculturalism, tolerance, blackness, racism, and self-esteem. Insiders, neighbours and outsiders in their various versions of Brixton use this

representation. It is somewhat of a chameleon-like representation in that it can be used to offer a picture of a cosmopolitan, tolerant and exciting community, or of a divided, hostile and violent population.

Ideas about diversity can be manipulated by different social groups to support a social representation of Brixton as Bad. Within this version Brixton is construed as a dangerous, foreign, and threatening area made up of criminal and aggressive black people. Heavily loaded representations of black people support and extend representations of Brixton. A consequence of this is to stigmatise the area and bolster salient racist stereotypes mediated in wider discourses. Some children use this representation to collectively assert that Brixton *is*, in reality, a 'bad' place with 'bad' people. In contrast, other children present this representation as a biased misconception. The media, these children explain, wrongly portray people from Brixton as bad.

Brixton as Diverse is dominant in the discourse of both insiders and neighbours about Brixton. As Brixton as Bad, in the focus group material, is less salient, I shall focus first on ideas about diversity. This is not say that the representation of Brixton as Bad is not important here. In Chapter Seven I demonstrate how the social representation of Brixton as Bad pervades the everyday reality of those who live in that area. It becomes apparent in this next chapter that both representations are constructed through and against each other. Ideas about diversity support images of Brixton as foreign and different and as fundamentally 'bad'. However, before these connections are made, we need a detailed explication of both representations. This chapter deals with Brixton as Diverse; Chapter Seven examines Brixton as Bad.

Describing these two social representations does more than give the reader a detailed knowledge of how people make sense of Brixton. It enables me to explain how social representations are manipulated to:

- (1) construct alternative versions of Brixton,
- (2) stigmatise the community,
- (3) challenge stigma, and
- (4) construct both identity and difference.



The material presented in the next three chapters provides many examples of the four points. Let me start with the first.

### 1.1. Brixton as Diverse

All descriptions of Brixton emphasise its cultural diversity. In terms of its population, its shops, its foods, its restaurants, its music, what Brixtonites have in common is their experience and appreciation of difference. Thus, ironically, its heterogeneous nature marks it as a distinct community. As one school-head says:

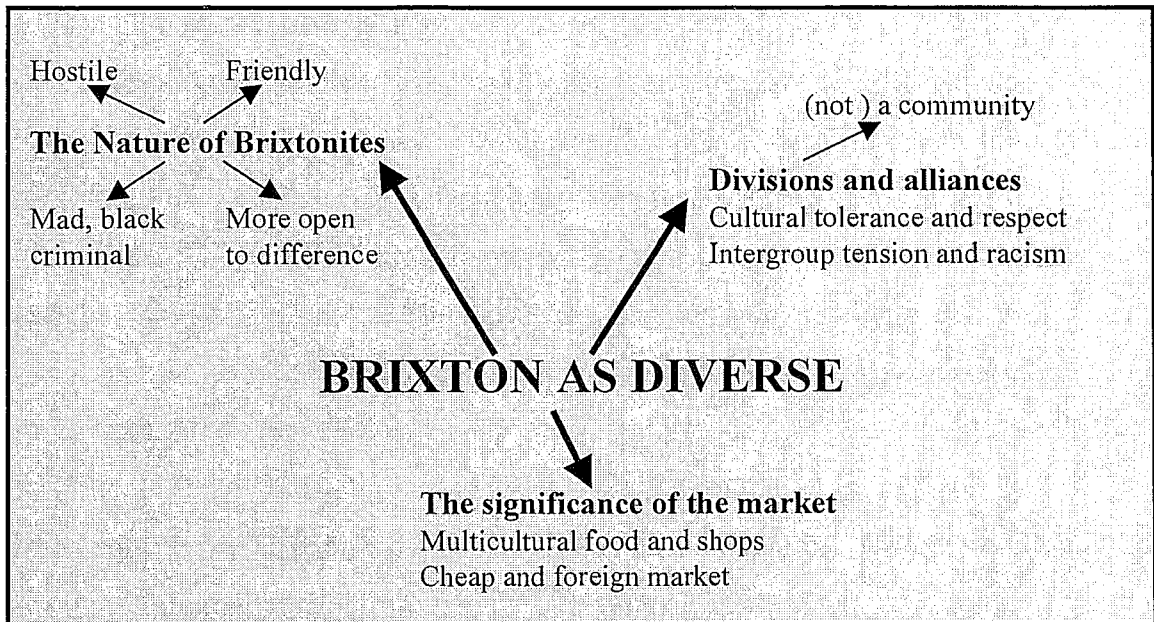
SH3: You could make it into basic things: you could say that they like the wide variety of ethnic food, and things that you can buy. That in itself is absolutely wonderful. I just think there is a lot going on, that whole sort of experience - it is learning about other people, it's exchanging, it's giving and taking with other people, really.

The representation 'Brixton as Diverse' is supported as a whole by peripheral information. As explained in Chapter Two, Abric's distinction between the stability of the core and the malleability of peripheral information is useful in explaining the uniform, yet fluid, nature of a social representation (Abric, 1993). The construction of Brixton as tolerant and respectful of cultural difference is founded on the central premise of Brixton as Diverse. As such the core of the representation (ideas about diversity) permits further elaboration: Brixton is culturally divided and so racist; Brixton is a community united by the common experience of racism and stigma; Brixton enriches Britain's cultural values and traditions, for example. The organising principle, diversity, is contextualised in ways which both denigrate and promote Brixton as a community.

The peripheral elements of the representation embellish the central core of 'Brixton as Diverse'. Different people use the representation in different ways and so offer their own elaborations of the main theme. The central nucleus of the representation is evaluated differently to create two distinct, activated versions of Brixton (Pereira de Sá, 1996). As such the representation includes both the "benefits of really a multi-ethnic environment" (SH3) and the stigma of living in a divided and violent ghetto (Tom).

There are three main peripheral elements. These are:

1. Divisions and alliances;
2. The nature of Brixtonites;
3. The significance of the market.



*The core and peripheral elements of the social representation of Brixton as Diverse.*

### 1.2. Divisions and alliances

Brixton is undeniably multicultural. There are approximately 110 languages spoken in the area (Lambeth Statistics, 1999). The main ethnic groups in the community are African-Caribbean (predominantly Barbadian, Jamaican, Trinidadian), African (mainly Nigerian, Ghanaian, Kenyan, Ugandan, and Eritrean), Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Vietnamese, Chinese, Portuguese, Kurd, South American, Scottish, Irish, and English. There are also large Muslim and Christian communities within Brixton (Lambeth Education Statistics, 1997-98). As one child, in the very first few minutes of a mixed focus group, put it very concisely: "Brixton is a multicultural society with many different ethnic backgrounds" (Mahua).

While it is fair to say that all commentators on Brixton would agree with this, different people would attribute quite different consequences to this multiculturalism. On its own this statement tells us very little. Does Mahua think this is a good or bad thing? Does

'multicultural' mean rich in cultural difference and cultural tolerance? Are different ethnicities being romantically exoticised? Or is 'multicultural' a signpost for threatening and alien?

Different people would indeed agree with these quite different suggestions. In order to understand how Brixton's diversity can be anchored so differently in common sense we need to investigate the complexity of this representation. We need to ask who is using the representation, why, in what situation, and for what end? A pure textual analysis of the transcripts would dislocate meanings from their place and purpose in particular interactions. The value of the perspective of social representations for this kind of research should be apparent. Through examining the inter-relationships between talk, representations and identities we can learn what is at stake in the negotiation of different social representations.

When considering Brixton's diversity in terms of the dynamics of intergroup relations two quite different versions are possible. In general, insiders use this representation to paint a picture of a culturally tolerant and respectful community. Neighbours, again in general, utilise this representation in their portrayal of a tense and racist area characterised by inter-cultural conflicts and hostility. Thus:

## Social representation of Brixton as a diverse community



**DIVERSITY =  
Cultural tolerance and respect**

**DIVERSITY =  
Intergroup tension and racism**

The social representation of Brixton as Diverse supports *both* the claim that Brixton is too divided to be a community *and* the claim that Brixton is united in its appreciation of differences of all kinds.

A representation can be manipulated in different ways to produce quite different versions of the same social object, in this case - Brixton. Similar descriptions of different ethnic groups in Brixton, of the crowded and noisy streets, and of the food sold in the market are woven together in different patterns, and so present confusingly ambivalent versions of the same place. They may even contain the same information about local characters or memorable events. What is different, and this is crucial, is the import and purpose of such stories. Stories are told to support and defend one's view on the world and one's position within it. These storytellers not only locate themselves in relation to Brixton but, in doing so, they may affirm or challenge prevailing stigmatising representations about the general area where they live.

I shall go on to explain how social representations of Brixton are manipulated in building community identities, in stigmatising the community and in challenging this stigma. First, however, let us look at the different versions of Brixton.

### 1.3. Insiders' version: Cultural tolerance and respect

The social representation of Brixton as Diverse is used by insiders to affirm that, indeed, there is a strong sense of community in Brixton. In fact, it is the experience of diversity and the resultant appreciation of tolerance that are seen to define what Brixton is and what it is like to live there (Gbadamosi, 1994). Cultural knowledge, cultural acceptance and cultural respect are the qualities that Brixtonites proudly claim as the defining characteristics of their area.

For the most part, these young people co-construct a version of Brixton as accepting of difference and therefore as non-racist. As one British-Chinese Brixtonite explained Brixton is "all about acceptance. Everyone is accepting each other" (Weona). The diversity of Brixton is seen to promote tolerance and understanding, and this makes Brixton a comfortable and secure place in which to live. This is especially true for children who are often the target of stigmatising representations. Chantelle, a black insider, for example, explains that "cos you live with all different people, different colours, you feel happy that it doesn't matter". When asked what they liked best about Brixton, insiders generally stressed the humanity of Brixton. Take these answers:

Caroline: So if you took the things that you like about this area, that you would like your kids to have, say, what would they be?

Ien: The ability to mingle with other people, definitely.

Weona: To have inter-racial relationships, you know, no discrimination.

The staff in all three schools spoke of the satisfaction and pleasure they gain in working in a multicultural community. SH3 stressed that, rather than simply accommodating diversity, her school is actively “celebrating that cultural diversity.” There is a strong sense that people brought up in such a diverse setting will learn to appreciate the value of difference. Because of the differences which characterise Brixton in terms of its ethnicity, dress, music, religion and colour, insiders argue that “there’s not that much discrimination” compared to other places in London (Ien). As these Vietnamese and mixed-heritage girls explain:

Dee: In Brixton they don’t really look at you that much cos of your race.

Grace: Cos Brixton is more mixed race, and they don’t really care about your race.

In identifying collectively with a culturally rich and tolerant community, insiders bolster their own self-esteem and pride. Social representations not only tell us how people understand the worlds in which they live. They also tell us where it is that people position themselves in these worlds and the meaning they give to this relationship (Jodelet, 1991). For insiders, who face the stigmatising representations of the outside world, it is vitally important to subvert the representations of others and to promote more positive community representations. In this way, insiders are able to build and to defend positive identities in relation to Brixton.

#### 1.4. Neighbours’ version: Intergroup tensions and racism

Neighbours, by contrast, draw on the social representation of Brixton as Diverse to very different effect. For neighbours Brixton’s diversity means distrust, prejudice and hostility between different groups. So divided is Brixton, in the view of neighbours, that it cannot ‘really’ be considered a community, as these African-Caribbean neighbours question:

Winston: What do you mean Brixton is a community?! People in Brixton are always beating up each other! Communities don't beat up each other!

Theo: I never said that it was a community! If you says community, yeah, (that should mean) people work together, you know. If they (Brixtonites) were brought up in this country dealing with violence and all those kind of things - they are not a community, or people that work together.

Paul: That's the thing, like, some people in Brixton would not be like part of the community. They don't class themselves as part of the community.

Caroline: What kind of people don't class themselves as-

Theo: Racism people who don't like each other. You know, they don't like whites. 'I hate the whites' - something like that.

Defining Brixton as racist, rather than tolerant, is common amongst neighbours. More so than neighbouring regions, these children assert that Brixton is spoilt by the ignorance, fear and violence of difference. These black British boys explain:

Cliff: There is no 'ifs' or 'shoulds' cos at the end of the day it's not going to happen (that is, change). At the end of the day Brixton is always going to be an area full of racism.

Dean: If anything it is going to get worse.

Malcolm: As long as there is racism there will always be violence.

Cliff: But it's just that there is more of it in Brixton then anywhere else.

The fact that neighbours have friends of different ethnic backgrounds and of different skin colour shows they, themselves, appreciate and enjoy intercultural and black-white alliances. The all-neighbour focus group, for example, which painted the most damning picture of Brixton, was made up of six firm friends - three black African, one black African-Caribbean, one white British and one American-British. What is different to insiders, is that these young people do not perceive *Brixton per se* as culturally tolerant. Cultural respect and open-mindedness are possible in any mixed-colour interaction; they are not seen as distinctive features of Brixton, as they are for insiders.

While insiders draw on the representation of Brixton as Diverse to collectively establish and to maintain a positive community identity, neighbours manipulate the same

representation as a way of distancing themselves from Brixton. Neighbours' version of Brixton stresses exotic difference, strangeness and disadvantage. Here the community is divided along skin-colour, ethnic and religious lines and marred by tension and conflict between these groups. For neighbours the threat of violence is never far away. As African-Caribbean boys from Clapham and Stockwell warn:

Winston: It's multiracial, every, every race. (Say) you are walking through Brixton - you see every single person from every single country. BUT! But, don't bump (into) no one.

Paul: It's fine to be there, and then you just see the big gangsters there and you got to leg it, man!

Presenting a version of Brixton is more than a simple description. It reveals one's relationship to that community and one's sense of self. Because versions of Brixton support or contest stigmatising social representations, the location of self in relation to Brixton is crucial. If one identifies with Brixton, the possibility of stigma cannot be ignored. If one rejects association with Brixton, stigmatising representations enable the establishment and maintenance of this distance.

Let us look at this in more detail. The peripheral elements of the representation Brixton as Diverse, which relate to the nature of Brixtonites, are central to understanding the relationship between re-presentation and identity. In highlighting these aspects of the representation insiders and neighbours claim or reject community membership.

## 2. The Nature of Brixtonites

In describing the character of Brixtonites, insiders and neighbours position themselves in relation to Brixton. Both insiders and neighbours would probably agree with this answer:

Caroline: If you were going to describe what people in Brixton were like, what would you say?

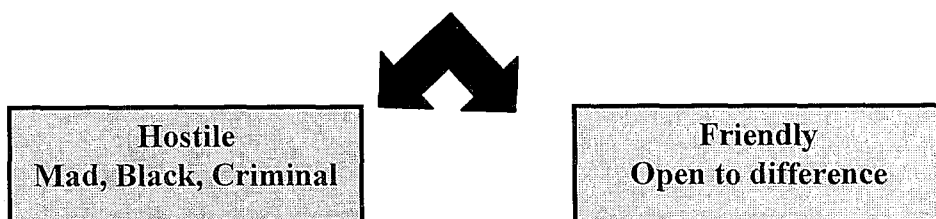
Jayna: I'd say that they are different, different. Everyone is different.

The point to note here is that neighbours and insiders value 'difference' itself differently. For neighbours, whose aim is to distance themselves from Brixton,

difference is to be denigrated. For insiders, whose collaborative aim is to create a membership of which they can be proud, difference is to be celebrated. “Associating the (stigmatised) characteristic with another positively valued characteristic” is a common strategy in maintaining self-esteem when collective identities are threatened, as Breakwell (1986) has pointed out (p. 105).

Insiders concentrate on the positive aspects of multiculturalism and so co-construct identities as members of a tolerant and friendly community. Using the same social representation of Brixton, neighbours manage to denigrate Brixtonites as being aggressive and prejudiced. In examining how the same representation may denigrate or promote community we may theorise the relationship between social representations and stigma.

## Social representation of Brixton as a diverse community



The main difference between insiders and neighbours is that they believe diversity has different consequences for the people who live in Brixton. While insiders generally paint a very positive picture of an open-minded, friendly and proud people of all colours, ethnicities and religions, neighbours predominantly describe Brixtonites as “black, criminal, dangerous” (Katrina). Exploring this aspect of the representation of Brixton as Diverse, leads us to the uses and consequences of social re-presentation. That is, in examining the relationship between re-presentation and identity, we uncover a struggle over stigma. Social representations can be used to stigmatise others in collectively establishing superiority over other groups, *and* social representations can be used to contest this stigma.



### 2.1. Establishing difference

Neighbours maintain that Brixton is unique, both in its population and in its problems. More importantly, neighbours stress that Brixtonites are “not like us” (Tom). Neighbours’ identity as people who may live in the general locality of Brixton, and yet who are not ‘Brixtonites’, is continually in question. The less certain this distinction, the more important it is that neighbours firmly establish and defend their identity. Being (mis)taken as a Brixtonite is a constant anxiety for neighbours. Thus they have to take every opportunity to assert their difference and their disassociation from Brixton. For those who live in the centre of Brixton but who, collectively, distance themselves from Brixton, the desire to accentuate this difference is all the more acute.

Social representations serve this purpose in demarcating the symbolic borders of a community and establishing its shared symbolic meanings. They can be utilised in asserting difference and marginalising social groups in the interests of others. Neighbours, in their uncertain quest to establish difference, need to mark their difference from Brixton, and, simultaneously, to deprecate Brixton against their own common identities. In this way social representations may marginalise and stigmatise a community. Neighbours, for example, portray Brixtonites as closed and unfriendly. Valerie, a white British girl from Norwood, for example, asks: “Why can’t people from Brixton get along with other people? ... People from Brixton don’t get along with people who don’t come from Brixton.”

Generalising across the community, rather than contrasting individual particularities, is another way of affirming neighbours’ difference from Brixton. Rather than seeing Brixton as multicultural, as insiders do, and detailing the different foods and fashions of those living and working in the area, neighbours state “Brixton is a black people’s community” (Samia). Neighbours, like outsiders, re-present Brixton as black as a way of exoticising and condemning the place and its population, as well as black people in general. Social representations of black people are intertwined with cultural myths about criminality, aggression and madness (Fanon, 1952). Neighbours draw on the negative representations of Brixton offered in dominant discourses, as a way of establishing their difference to Brixton. For outsiders, re-presenting Brixton as black serves to denigrate

Brixton, to maintain unequal power relations between this area and others, and to project racist discourses onto a culturally diverse population. Chapter Seven, which examines the social representation of Brixton as Bad, offers insights into the ideological manipulation of social representations.

In this chapter, however, our concern is with the portrayal of Brixton as Diverse. What is relevant, here, is that the relationship between blacks and whites in Brixton is salient in descriptions of everyday life. Both insiders and neighbours consider some people may find Brixton's black population intimidating. A British-Chinese insider explains:

Weona: Because the majority of blacks in Brixton are so much bigger than, I would say, than white people, or other, other sort of race. I think a lot of other people feel quite intimidated. I mean, I know people who do, who just live on the outskirts of Brixton, but maybe the more white areas, the white built-up areas, if they came into Brixton they wouldn't feel so comfortable.

Some young people in this study blamed black Brixtonites for conflict and crime between white and black people. Many of these were black themselves, lived in the general area of Brixton but did not associate themselves with Brixton. These children seem to have adopted widely shared stigmatising representations of black people and applied them, unproblematically, to their own reference groups and to themselves. A black British boy describes:

Dean: If there are a group of black boys, they will pick on the white boys, and rob them and rob their money and stuff. And, um, some of the white boys are young compared to the boys that pick on them, so they can't really do anything.

## 2.2. Stigmatising the community

Stigma is an imposition of "an undesired differentness" (Goffman, 1968, p. 15); that is, the imposition of social representations about particular social groups onto those groups who do not share those representations. Outsiders have more representational resources to employ social representations of Brixton in marking and strengthening their own interests, as I explore in Chapter Eight. Because neighbours are intimately connected to Brixton in their desire to reject such an association, their urge to establish and to maintain their distance is intense.

Neighbours, as opposed to insiders, are more adamant in their belief that black Brixtonites are criminal and aggressive. The most vicious in this attack are the black children who live in the general locality of Brixton but do not claim community membership. This is because their identity as neighbours is precarious. Their address, their experience of, and knowledge about, Brixton, and often their black skin, may brand them as Brixtonites. Denigrating Brixton and its population is one way in which they establish and maintain their own distance from it. All neighbours who live in Brixton “downgrade” the community in this way (Jayna).

Theo, a black neighbour who lives in the centre of Brixton but fiercely rejects any association with the community, provides many examples of this. He says that he doesn't like Brixton as “there is too much mugging” and he is adamant that the “problem” with Brixton is its “mix” of people. He says “it's about the people, the people who live round there” who, in his view, are criminal and mad. “They need to take all those people away from there”, and, he repeatedly insists, “they should separate them”. Brixton's diversity means, for him, that the whole population learns the bad habits and criminality from “the bad people” (Theo).

Those who identify with Brixton assert that too much is made of crime. Because it is a busy area, some assert, and because everyone knows each other, it is a comparatively safe area. Connor, an insider from Stockwell, explains: “Brixton's alright, cos you can walk down the street and you can feel kind of safe, cos there are a lot of people there, so you don't feel that you are going to get mugged.”

Many neighbours associate crime, violence and drugs with Brixton's African-Caribbean population. In their need to disassociate themselves from Brixton, they borrow from heavily loaded racist representations. For example, in response to my initial request to describe Brixton, these mixed-heritage and black girls quickly linked black people, drugs, murders and rioting:

Louise: You know after the Brixton riot? Brixton was known as the black community.

Caroline: The black community? (Yeah) So when it is described as the black community, what does that mean?

Louise: It means that there are black people only. A lot of yardies.

Sam: There's too many drugs, murders -

Caroline: A lot of what?

Louise: Murders and riots as well.

SH1 is right to say "people think of Brixton in terms of images of drugs, sort of - unruly black people rioting." In the all-neighbour focus group, the black boys concentrated on what they saw as the "problem" of Brixton. It is possible to see in the following extract how they deploy stereotypes about black culture, criminality and drugs (weed) to disparage Brixtonites and to create a distance between themselves, as neighbours, and these very stereotypes.

Tom: The problem is drugs. There are too many mad people there.

Theo: Yeah, people are high. And there are people that sell weed on the way, you know. I was coming to Brixton and I saw this guy selling *weed*

...

Theo: There is lots of weed, weed-

Winston: There is always lots of black people selling drugs.

These and other stigmatising representations of black people uphold neighbours' identity as non-Brixtonites. The significance of the social representation of Brixton as Black is explored in the next chapter; what is pertinent here is that neighbours use this representation to support a version of a divided and violent area populated by aggressive and criminal people. These people, neighbours stress, are strange, exotic, and, most importantly, "not like us" (Tom).

White people in Brixton are also stigmatised as strange for mixing with the black community and adopting black fashions, as these mixed-heritage and African-Caribbean girls say:

Sam: I'm not being racist or anything but there was this man, yeah? (Who was) Mixing with the black community, yeah? And he had all dreadlocks and he smells as well.

Louise: And there is this white man right, with blonde hair, what he does, man, is he paints himself red, with bit of silver on him and he goes like that, and he plays a

Both white and black Brixtonites are often described as “weird” and “mentally ill” (Jack). For Katrina, this is because “everyone in Brixton wants to stand out from everyone else”. She and her friends give many examples of the strange people they see in Brixton. Here is one from Sam:

Sam: Children can't travel on the bus by themselves cos all a lot of weirdo's come on especially - there was this man yeah? And he was going like this (*rolls her eyes around*) like he was drunk or something, then when this women went past him, he touch up her back and everything -

Katrina: - her bum!

Sam: - and the woman screamed and then the woman's boyfriend or husband said, “Oy! what are you playing at?”, and the man was black and there was going to be a fight, yeah! And so the man said “I didn't do anything, that was an accident” and then munching up the crisps in front of the man's face.

The characterisation of Brixton as strange and Brixtonites as mad has the effect of creating a distinction between insiders and neighbours. Neighbours utilise powerful stigmatising representations to mark Brixtonites as different and as inferior. Insiders are well aware that they are “looked down on” (Cheng) in this way. If they are to succeed in building a positive community identity they must face and challenge this stigma.

### 2.3. Transcending stigma

Identity emerges from the negotiation of social representations concerning one's reference and membership groups (Hyman and Singer, 1968). We all have to come to terms with how the generalised other ‘sees’ us (Mead, 1934; Hall, 1990). The difficulty for children in Brixton is that the generalised other manipulates social representations of where they live which marginalise and stigmatise their own experience. The struggle for

them is against the spoiling of identity (Goffman, 1968). Not all children have the representational resources to triumph in this struggle.

Hence, insiders need to establish a positive community identity by challenging others' stigmatising representations. "Re-definition or re-interpretation of the properties of the position occupied" is a common response to threatened identities (Breakwell, 1986, p. 90). Rather than problematising white-black relations in Brixton, for example, insiders portray diversity not only as normal but also as proof that Brixton is more culturally sophisticated than monocultural communities. Rather than being strange, exotic and threatening, they explain that, not only is there less discrimination in their community compared to other areas, but that Brixtonites are less likely to be prejudiced than are people from elsewhere. Ien, a Chinese insider, asserts this view clearly:

Caroline: So do you think that you would be different, if you had grown up somewhere else?

Weona: Definitely.

Ien: Probably: you won't have the open-mindedness about all the other cultures, you would

Neighbours and outsiders, who live in less diverse areas, according to insiders, are less able to appreciate or value cultural difference, as a mixed-heritage insider describes:

Grace: If you just live like all one nation, you won't get to know about how to speak different, or what other people do - cos you just do the same thing all the time. And all of you do the same thing. And you won't get to know what other people get to do and about other privileges as well.

Insiders and neighbours are confronted with the same diverse population in Brixton. The mix of ethnicities, religions and skin-colour is objectively the same, however one understands them. What is different is *how* insiders and neighbours re-present this diversity. Neighbours problematise it in order to establish a different identity for themselves. Insiders challenge the stigmatising representations of neighbours in proudly asserting a positive identity as members of a culturally diverse and respectful community. Vicky, a young black Brixtonite, for example, explains:

Vicky: In other areas, like North London there are more white people whatever, ... and racists round there. But Brixton welcomes all types of religion, or colour, whatever, race. They welcome everyone, and you wouldn't get beat up because you are a different colour. But if you come out of Brixton though and there's some areas, - there will be racist people. If they see you, because you are black you will get beat up, or whatever. It's happened to my brother before. ... Yeah, so you can't really put down Brixton, because at least we welcome everyone. There are areas that just don't do that.

#### 2.4. Establishing identity

Some insiders suggest that the common experiences and difficulties of living in Brixton bring people together, making it "easy to make friends" (Vicky). Living in Brixton is about "having a laugh, asking each other favours" (Chantelle). Jayna maintains that "people are so caring, like, they consider one another". Also Brixtonites are seen to stand up for each other. Take this exchange between two African-Caribbean girls:

Vicky: Yeah, that is something I have noticed about Brixton - someone always has to help you.

Jayna: If you are in need of help they don't just walk past you.

Diversity in Brixton does not simply mean that those living there are more knowledgeable about different cultures, traditions and foods. It means "not quarrelling, being one nation no matter what colour you are" as Chantelle puts it. People, collectively and individually, are accustomed to taking the perspective of the other, are more experienced in confronting and negotiating different subjectivities, and are less threatened by different symbolic constructions of reality. Brixtonites are used to difference, and so more accepting of difference and inequalities of all kinds, insiders maintain. Take this example on disability:

Vicky: "There is little boys that will hang (out) in a group and just because you might be a little bit disabled in a certain way, don't mean that you can't hang in that group, or hang around with those as your friends, cos they welcome all that. There is this kind of handicapped little boy called Jaydine, and cos he's a bit handicapped people think that, yeah, no one, I mean, he has friends, everyone talks to him, cos he doesn't disrespect no one, he treats everyone with respect, so he gets respect back.

In describing what Brixtonites are like, in identifying with the community, insiders are also describing themselves. When Chantelle, for example, says "everyone is mixed around, like, you can talk to all kinds of different people", she is saying that *she* can

understand and appreciate difference. Other insiders describe their knowledge of other cultures and languages and respect for different traditions and beliefs.

It is through manipulating the representation of Brixton as Diverse that insiders reject the stigma of others, and claim a positive community identity for themselves. Those who achieve this argue that Brixton is a happier, more fun-loving and more secure place to live. Insiders claim that Brixton is more open and more exciting because of the different cultures and beliefs, diverse foods, fashions and music, and different personalities accessible to all in Brixton. SH3, a Brixtonite herself, sums this up nicely:

SH3: Brixton has a liveliness and vibrancy (that) sort of rubs off on people. I think people are richer with that experience, and perhaps more open. I think it develops tolerance; it develops a huge amount of knowledge. I mean, the knowledge that they would have never come across. Um, it develops, as well, different ways of looking at things, different sorts of ideas about issues. It strengthens enormously the sort of cultural richness of the school, um, in all sorts of ways. ... It's very culturally enriching for our students. Plus things like music and things like that, the more sort of apparent things. But I think just different attitudes, and tolerance towards different attitudes is very important.

### 3. The Significance of the Market.

For both insiders and neighbours Brixton's food market symbolises the character of the community in general. The market provides, if you like, a condensed account of insiders' and neighbours' re-presentations of Brixton. Those who identify with Brixton develop stories about food and the market in quite different ways to neighbours. These stories allow me to illustrate further how social representations are manipulated in the imposition of stigma, the rejection of this stigma and the co-construction of identity. In this way the argument developed in the preceding sections will be extended.

A market is often an important place in the social construction of communities. This is because it is where insiders, neighbours and outsiders negotiate, communicate and so exchange views and ideas. Insiders are confronted with the stigmatising representations of neighbours; the pride and tolerance evident in Brixton may challenge neighbours' representations of Brixton. The market is a central part of the public sphere where different representations meet, clash and sometimes merge. Thus, talk about the market



reveals how insiders and neighbours see both Brixton and their relation to it. Social representations are traded in the market as well as fruit and vegetables.

## Social representation of Brixton as a diverse community



**Cheap, smelly  
Unhygienic foods  
Dangerous**

**Friendly, helpful  
Multicultural market  
Fun**

Brixton's market boasts an array of different foods, smells, and colours that boldly advertise the diversity of its population. As these mixed-heritage girls describe:

Chantelle: In the market, they sell like different countries' foods, and different clothes, things from different countries.

Grace: They sell different music as well. They don't just sell one, like English music. They sell all different musics.

This attracts many from outside the community to Brixton to buy unusual products. People come from far and wide to find the fruits and vegetables of their 'home' cultures. In most focus groups children claim that "everything is down Brixton" (Natasha). "You have everything in Brixton: it's like a little city" (Vicky). For insiders the number and type of shops in Brixton reflects the cultural diversity, the mix and the blend of cultural tastes, and Brixton's acceptance of, and attraction to, differences of all kinds. For neighbours the market exemplifies the poverty and squalor of Brixton, and Brixtonites' nature as different, foreign and hostile.

### 3.1. "Brixton caters for all"

Insiders draw on the social representation of Brixton as Diverse when describing the market. It is proof, both for insiders and neighbours, that Brixton's most distinctive feature is its multiculturalism. This diversity is something of which insiders are very proud, as are these black girls:

Mollie: They have different food for different races.

Miri: All different food shops, like MacDonalDs, Kentucky, Morleys, PizzaHut, Chinese shops, Caribbean shops, food shops, they have got down there as well. They cater for all, I say, Brixton caters for all.

Insiders, especially black insiders who live in Brixton, often refer to advantages of shopping in Brixton as a way of contextualising the social representation of Brixton as Diverse. They manage this representation to support their version of Brixton as a friendly, caring and culturally sophisticated community.

Walking through Brixton market, one cannot fail to feel the friendly atmosphere and the fusion of tastes, colours and smells. As the children say, “if you go to the market people are really friendly” (Pauline). Some insiders give short stories of stallholders giving them food as illustrations of Brixton’s community spirit. Here are two from a Bengali and an African insider:

Kesi: OK, when I was in Brixton market, with my little cousin and my aunty, and we stopped at the market and she wanted to pay for herself and the man goes ‘oh no, just take it, take it’. And the man just gave it free. And people are friendly in Brixton.

Danielle: The market, if you go to the market people are really friendly and they take money off if you don’t have any.

Insiders, I have shown, tell stories which illustrate that Brixton “welcomes all” (Vicky) and which reflect the multiculturalism of the community. Some insiders stress that it is not a matter of different cultures simply tolerating each other in Brixton. They explain that here diversity is experienced and celebrated by many in the everyday activities of eating, shopping, and choosing fashion and music. “If I celebrate Brixton market it’s because this diversity nourishes me”, Gbadamosi has proclaimed (1994, p. 37). This diversity is not a matter of different cultures or different market stalls simply coexisting side-by-side with little or no interaction. Many shops and services, they explain, manage to merge the needs and fashions of different ethnic groups. A mixed heritage insider explains:

Tara: There are lots of other places, like that there hair-dressers, called Andrea Pierre, which is (for) black and white people. Like, you usually see hairdressers; there are some hairdressers in Brixton just for black people, or just for white people. ... So I think they are starting to make things both of them cultures, not just one black people, this shop for black people, this shop for white people, this shop for this or for that.

### 3. 2. "Brixton is pong!"

Like insiders, neighbours manipulate the representation of Brixton as Diverse in giving their version of the market. However, though talking about the same place, and sometimes the same people, their appreciation of this shared reality is somewhat different. What they are keen to stress is that their knowledge of Brixton comes primarily from shopping in the market. This confirms that they are not members of the community. They are neighbours, living on the outskirts of Brixton and simply utilising its resources.

Alice, a white British girl, stresses her ignorance of, and so her distance from, Brixton, by saying that she would only go to Brixton "if my friends want to go shopping up there." Tom also uses this tactic to sustain his position outside of the area, as an observer of it. He explains how the shops in Brixton are popular and says, "That's why I think a lot of people go there". If neighbours are ever positive about Brixton it is generally about the cost of the goods in the market. For example, two African-Caribbean boys say:

Paul: And a positive thing about Brixton is about the cheap, cheap things. ... Brixton is like so cheap. You can buy like 8 apples for a pound.

Winston: They give you the goods cheap. You've got one-pound shop, anything there is a pound. ... I think that Brixton makes good provision for the people who are not, who obviously don't want to spend all their money; they just want to get cheap bargains.

In their effort to distance themselves from Brixton, neighbours are more likely to deprecate Brixton by representing the market and its produce as dirty, foreign and unhealthy. They say that it is "smelly" (Sam), "disgusting" (Katrina), "dirty and polluted" (Tom) and "a health hazard" (Jack).

Their version of a squalid market with unappetising food (selling “raw fish heads” and “chickens’ feet”, for example) is supported by their stories of the mad and aggressive people in Brixton. Jahoda’s (1999) extensive review of *Images of Savages* explains how the idea that black people eat food that white people would find dirty, disgusting and indigestible goes back centuries. “They can eat practically anything, such as raw and stinking rotten meat” (Jahoda, 1999, p. 67). Often narratives about exotic goods, strange customs and threatening behaviour are staged here in the market. Take these examples, from different focus groups, from two neighbours who live in Brixton:

Katrina: It’s not actually good in Brixton sometimes, because like, I was walking past the market and I saw this woman, yeah, with a big radio on her thing yeah, and she (was) half naked, yeah, and dancing in the middle of Brixton.

Theo: It’s a good place for people to go with their family, you know, if you want to take your children out and buy some things for your children. It’s a good place to go. But when you think about it well, you wouldn’t want to go there, cos you don’t know what is going to happen there, like your children might get hurt, or something like that.

### 3.3. Black people as scavengers

In this way, neighbours sustain a very different version of Brixton from that of insiders. What they say about food and the market is supported by their general representation of a diverse, divided, and foreign population. While both groups stress its diversity, they do so in different ways. Insiders describe cultural wealth and cultural exchange; neighbours concentrate on poverty and hostility. Neighbours’ portrayal of Brixton as dirty, polluted and unhygienic links this representation to a more widely shared social representation of black people as polluting, dangerous and sub-human (Jahoda, 1999)<sup>1</sup>. As Goffman (1968) recognised, “we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human” (p. 15). It is worth spending some time on this point as it illustrates the dialectic of stigma and of identity construction which pervades the lives of these children. The following lengthy extract reveals the difficulties these children face in coming to terms with others’ representations of them.

<sup>1</sup> Similar associations have been found in other studies on representations of blackness. Back, for example, found that whites claimed that their black next-door neighbours had “lower standards of hygiene” (Back, 1996, p. 42).

Pauline: I heard that in Brixton's MacDonalDs that they spit in the burgers, and I want to know if that is true.

Louise: I heard that they drop it on the floor and pick it up and serve it to you.

Caroline: I don't understand. Why do people tell those stories? Danielle?

Danielle: To make Brixton seem bad.

Caroline: But why do people do that?

Pauline: It's a joke, it's a joke. Like if you tell someone that they spit in the burgers, and they will go 'Guess what? You know that burger you just bought, someone spat in it', and they will go to the counter and make up argument. *(laughter)*

Sam: I heard that the tomato sauce was blood, and they mixed it in with some flour, yeah, and someone coughs on the chips, yeah, that's why they taste so salty.

Louise: And people just say that, to stop you eating in MacDonalDs as well, cos they can't afford it. There was these people standing outside MacDonalDs handing out leaflets, saying, you shouldn't eat at MacDonalDs *(referring to a recent animal rights demonstration)*.

Katrina: All that, what they say is true, cos I've got a friend, yeah, my sister's friend, yeah, um um um the person worked in MacDonalDs and he sees this too. And he said to my sister that that it's true what they do sometimes is that they drop the things, yeah, they drop the burgers

Caroline: But do people say that they do this in all MacDonalDs?

Pauline: No, also busy MacDonalDs like the West End, because they are really busy and they rush around and everything, and they drop food, and they drop it on the floor, because they have no time to pick it up and put it back -

Sam: And the juice, they wee in it.

Kesi: And my cousin is only 4 years old and she used to like, love MacDonalDs, but when she heard that they spat in Brixton, now she is always crying, and now her mum has to make it for her.

Caroline: Oh, right, OK. So people tell these bad stories about MacDonalDs because it's a busy MacDonalDs?

Danielle: And because everyone just wants to like, like some people they make a story and so that other people will go 'urrrr', and they will say 'who told you that?' and they will go 'oh, she told me that'.

Caroline: So, it's not because it's in Brixton?

Danielle: Yes, I think it is.

Caroline: Well, why? Can you explain?

Danielle: I think that it's all Brixton, yeah, and people don't respect Brixton, and so they are able to do all this stuff. Cos, you know, some white people, they are really upper class, and posh and you know that if you dropped something on the floor, they wouldn't give it back to you like that, some of them. But because most people here are black, yeah, they think, 'oh, that's what they will do, you know how the black people are, if they drop chips on the floor, in the street, they will pick it up and start yamming it out, and all that', that's what they think black people do. I think it's because of black people, and Brixton and all that, when it's busy, I think they do drop them

Louise: They do, they do, cos they don't have no time to go back and change and get a new one.

Caroline: Do you agree with what Danielle has said? What Danielle has said is quite interesting (yes, yes)

Pauline: In other words they are trying to say that black people are scavengers!

Insiders (who I have prefixed with 'I' in the extract above) and neighbours (prefixed with 'N') position themselves differently in relation to these stories. Neighbours present them as "true" (see Sam, Katrina and Kesi), while for insiders they are the prejudiced views of outsiders based, in the main, on stigma and perhaps a little truth (burgers may be dropped on the floor when it is busy). Outsiders, insiders suggest, may manipulate racist representations of black people in denigrating them as alien and their food as almost unfit for human consumption. If these children are to deploy the representational skills to reject such stigma, insiders must remain convinced that these are, indeed, racist stories and nothing more.

In order to build a positive identity, these children need, first, to recognise the stigmatising representations of others. This means one has to acknowledge them, evaluate them, and decide if they are true or not. Once these negative stereotypes are abandoned as stigma, children can begin to construct more positive images of where they live. However, some children and some adults never quite leave these doubts behind.

These are crucial issues, and go to the very heart of my personal and research interests. However, they concern the meeting of outsiders' representations and insiders' identities, and, therefore, are more properly placed in Chapter Eight: *The Struggle for Recognition and Esteem*.

#### 3.4. Enjoying food, enjoying culture

This mix of cultures evident in Brixton market occurs both at a community, and at an individual, level. Danielle, a black African insider, explains how learning about the different foods of different cultures can encourage an interest in cultural difference:

Danielle: I didn't know, yeah, how can I explain this?, that sushi was raw fish, until I met someone who knew it was raw fish. I didn't know that what Indians wear is saris until I met somebody that told me that. You don't know things until you hear it from other people. Like they all got, like all these folks' tales, and all that from different countries, like when they say 'oh, I've got a story to tell you from like India', or something like that - you go, 'oh, it's boring' yeah, but if you listen to them properly it's interesting because you hear all these different things about them.

In School1, where it seems that every opportunity is taken to encourage discussion of cultural differences, food is taken as one way of opening this debate. The school-head is keen to instil in her pupils a sense of cultural pride and a realisation of Britain's culturally diverse history. Take her comment:

SH1: Because what we are trying to say is that the way that culture evolves, that obviously what they (children in Brixton) bring to this country is actually going to help develop the culture, the culture is a changing thing. I mean they actually realise now that it wasn't until, um, large, um, numbers of people from Jamaica came to England, from Africa and India, that rice became part of the carbohydrate staple food, because before rice was used as a pudding. And lots of the things like that, the ways that our eating habits have changed has been impacted and impacted, that culture has impacted on the way our eating habits have changed.

For both neighbours and insiders the market expresses the nature of Brixtonites: for the former tension, hostility and foreignness; for insiders it expresses Brixton's appreciation of diversity. In this way neighbours and insiders make sense of the same public space, the market, using the same representation. What is different is how these two groups manipulate the same knowledge in the defence of their identity as either Brixtonites or as non-Brixtonites. Social re-presentation provides a basis of the construction of both difference and self-consciousness.

### In conclusion

In this chapter I have explained how representations define community identity in the context of Brixton. I have stressed that insiders and neighbours represent Brixton's diversity in different ways in the construction of identity and difference. Insiders and neighbours use the same information to construct Brixton as Diverse, but this diversity is contextualised differently in the two cases. For insiders, the community's diversity leads to cultural tolerance and respect, knowledge about, and attraction to, cultural difference, pride in one's self and one's history, an openness of mind, and the range and love of different foods and fashions. For neighbours, diversity means a divided and violent black population, characterised by the threat of the foreign, and made up of insecure and aggressive misfits and criminals. These different versions of Brixton are not constructed with different representations: they stem from, and so confirm, the same representational field. Perhaps we can say that they are two sides of the same coin, verifying and contradicting each other simultaneously.

My research into the social construction of community centres precisely on this dialectic. In attempting to capture the seemingly contradictory, divisive yet communal character of Brixton, I am doing more than offering a detailed study of a particular community. Through my analysis of the social construction of community in Brixton, and the meaning given to it by both insiders and neighbours, I present an example of how communities are lived through the negotiation of identities and social representations. A social psychology of community needs a theory capable of unravelling the dialectics of identity/difference and community/stigma. I hope that this chapter has shown that the perspective of social representations is well equipped to do this. It has enabled a thorough exploration into how representations stigmatise communities, contest stigma and establish both identity and difference. To explore this further, we need to consider how Brixton is re-presented by the outside world. This is the focus of the next chapter.



## CHAPTER 7

### **Brixton is Bad: Representation and Reality?**

#### 1. In the Eye of the Media

- 1.1. “Brixton is one of the baddest places”
- 1.2. “The reality can be bad”
- 1.3. Representation or reality?

#### 2. The Social Representation: Brixton is Bad

- 2.1. Rough: “Brixton is a gangster’s paradise!”
- 2.2. “Brixton is a black community”
- 2.3. Brixton is threatening
- 2.4. People in Brixton have “bad attitude”

#### 3. Analysing the Media

- 3.1. A bifocal analysis
- 3.2. Encoding/decoding: An illustration
- 3.3. The politics of representation
- 3.4. Polysemic interpretations and dominant representations

#### 4. An Illustration: Electric Avenue

- 4.1. Decoding the programme
- 4.2. People in Brixton: Black or mixed?
- 4.3. Introducing Stacey: A rough past
- 4.4. A demonstration: The threat of violence
- 4.5. Deviant attitudes

#### 5. Stigmatising Brixton

- 5.1. The programme “just confirmed stereotypes”
- 5.2. Challenging stereotypes: “Aim for the top!”
- 5.3. A partial representation of reality
- 5.4. The wider picture

In this chapter I explore the interplay between representations and reality through the analysis of images of Brixton in the media. After examining insiders’ and neighbours’ views of media portrayals of Brixton, I discuss a dominant social representation of Brixton in the media: Brixton as Bad. I use this representation to decode a documentary on adolescents in Brixton. This enables me to examine the role of the media in developing, confirming and challenging representations of a community. This shows how the media ascribe an identity to Brixton.

## 1. In the Eye of the Media

Communities are united, at a bare minimum, by the shared experience of being portrayed as a community. This is very clear in the case of Brixton. While there is little agreement on the physical boundaries of Brixton, to the outside world there is little argument that it is a coherent and distinct place. It is a place at least distinctive enough to appear in the news and documentaries without any explanations of where it is, who its inhabitants are and what makes it unique.

Communities acquire reality through the social representations we collectively develop about places with which we simultaneously identify and from which we distance ourselves. Not only do social representations describe Brixton; Brixton acquires reality through these social representations. This, I hope, I have illustrated in the previous chapter. This demonstrates that people in Brixton develop an understanding of where they live and co-construct their relationship to it through the eyes of others. That is, the way Brixton is collectively constructed by others outside of the area influences not only how those living in the area experience *Brixton* but also how insiders and neighbours experience *themselves*. In this way, social representations of Brixton displayed in the media play an important role both in the social construction of the community and in the negotiation of social identities within the area. In constructing a coherent and yet unstable community identity, children and adults alike recognise, develop and resist others' social representations of Brixton. These identities are temporal and contextualised identities and therefore open to challenge and debate, as I discussed in Chapter Four. What has emerged from the focus group and inter-view material discussed in the previous chapters is that community identities are negotiated through and against outsiders' representations of the area. For most in the study, the media are the principal carriers of outsiders' representations.

### 1.1. "Brixton is one of the baddest places"

Media images and narratives, I discovered in the course of the fieldwork, enter into, and impact upon, the self-consciousness of children living in the general area of Brixton. Clear views on the way that Brixton is represented in the media emerged from an analysis of the

focus group transcripts. Indeed, children agreed that the dominant media representations of Brixton are coherent, pervasive and extremely disparaging. One Chinese girl explains this candidly: “Everybody has been watching the news. They think that it is a bad place to go: ‘don’t go there’” (Cheng).

In describing media representations of Brixton, the word ‘bad’ is repeatedly used (over 150 times), by all children in all seven focus groups. While for some children Brixton itself is bad, for others it is its reputation, or its “image”, which is bad (Aimee). Thus the representation ‘Brixton is Bad’ is the reality for some, for others it is the stereotype. In the everyday knowledge of these children there clearly appears, even if they are not fully aware of it, the distinction between reality and representation. Whichever is the case, representation or reality, all children are affected by the idea that Brixton is bad. Another school-head explains how this can make children in Brixton ashamed of their area:

SH2: Certainly Brixton has got a very negative kind of aura if you like in the press. You know, it just has a bad - aura, really, a bad image, and I think, I don’t know, it’s as if almost there’s an industry devoted to keeping Brixton down, maintaining that negative view. And our kids really suffer from that, and then they pick it up because they read the same newspapers and so some of them are ashamed of living in Brixton and they shouldn’t be.

Insiders claim that the media are largely responsible for maintaining negative views of Brixton. These children argue that the news exaggerates the problems in the area as “the slightest little move that you might just move the wrong way, and they will be broadcasting it all over London TV, and London newspapers and everything” (Vicky). These black and mixed-heritage girls explain this:

Danielle: Brixton’s alright, yeah. Like when we had that Brixton carnival thing, right. It’s alright, everyone is friendly. ... Brixton ain’t always bad or anything like that, it’s just that sometimes when things happen that’s what people think that Brixton is. Cos they just take it for the criminal stuff, they don’t take it for anything else. Good stuff does happen round here.

Louise: It’s true what Danielle was saying, yeah, cos people just see one side of Brixton, like, yeah, people just see one side of Brixton, like there’s many parts of Brixton that people ain’t seeing and that could be the good parts and they haven’t explored yet, but they just go to one part: ‘oh, Brixton is bad’. They don’t see the other parts, cos Brixton has a nice side and a bad side.

Pauline: And when Nelson Mandela came, that was a good thing, everyone talked about that for a week, and when the shooting came everyone talked about that for about two years.

Thus the media are seen as portraying negative, exaggerated and misleading images of Brixton. Some children suggest that this is done consciously; others believe that many people in the media are “just ignorant, really ignorant of how Brixton really is” (Pauline). Some suggest that the television portrayals of Brixton are negative as, for the most part, they appear in the news, and news are by nature negative. However, some insiders felt that news channels targeted Brixton in particular as there is “a lot of racism towards Brixton” (Neena). This extract demonstrates this view:

Caroline: So say if a shooting happened in Tooting, would that get the same attention?

Others: NO, no!

You would hear about it for one day, one day! And then you will never hear it.

And it will be dropped, and you will never hear it again. And that’s happened before.

Caroline: Why is that?

Salote: They really don’t like Brixton.

On the whole, insiders maintain that the dominant media representation of Brixton is ‘bad’. When insiders are together with neighbours in a mixed focus group they are adamant that this is an exaggeration (see below). When in an all-insider group they are more reflective and consider the possibility that this reputation is based, in part, on fact. These children are more likely to paint a balanced picture, saying that while “there are good and bad things that happen there” - “it’s not really as bad as people think” (Jayna).

### 1.2. “The reality can be bad”

One of the school-heads asserts that “the reality can be bad”, as stigma towards Brixton is based, in part, on the harsh reality. Adolescents who live in the general area but do not identify with Brixton - neighbours - agree with insiders that the media portrayal of Brixton is negative. However, they claim that this is because, in fact, “bad things *do* happen” in Brixton (Malcolm). The representation, in their view, is the reality. One of the school-heads expands on the difficulties of living in Brixton at length:

SH2: The reality can be, as I said, bad, you know. When there's shootings in Brixton it's sort of demoralising, you know. There seems to be a number of, sort of, shootings. And I think, you know, that is demoralising. ... And there's something about living in the estates and stuff: noise, poor quality housing, council not doing the repairs, or whatever it is, you know, um, and that's demoralising for them as well. ... I think actually living in Brixton affects the girls (at her school), you know. And, yes, it is negative. Um, and sometimes because it is just the media playing it all up, but also it is negative in the sense of some of the conditions that they have to live in. Violence, they will tell you about the violence, some of them here have been affected by the violence because of, you know, parents or brothers or whatever it is. So if I think the reality of living in Brixton sometimes, you know, gets them down. So it has a big impact on them.

Amongst the children in the all-neighbour focus group, who were predominantly black, there is agreement that Brixton has a bad reputation because of the drug dealing and crime in the area, as this extract illustrates:

Caroline: So do people from Brixton, do they deserve the bad reputation they have?

Winston: There is always lots of black people selling drugs.

Paul: Not all of them.

Theo: Not all, the majority, some -

Jack: It's just a small majority that give them the reputation.

Paul: The only reason why Brixton has that reputation is that there *are* muggings!

Neighbours, unlike insiders, adopt the dominant representation of Brixton as Bad. In mixed focus groups, this meets hostility from insiders. This explains why it is that neighbours in the all-neighbour focus group are more likely to disparage Brixton than those who are in the company of insiders. Some neighbours in mixed focus groups, however, have the courage to disclose their views, even when this causes anger and ridicule from insiders. For example, Samia, a Muslim neighbour, persists in asserting her views about Brixton. Insiders in this group of older girls of mixed nationalities react defiantly and loudly to Samia's negative comments:

Aimee: One of my friends, he was mistaken and what happened, right, was that the Triads (*a London-Chinese gang*) went to his school, and he was actually mistaken for another person and he actually got chopped on his hand with a machete.

Samia: See! Don't these things scare you? Like these things that come to mind. If that's happened there, then why would I want to go there?

*All shouting at once*

Samia: I know Brixton, and it's not that dangerous, I mean, it can be and it can't be, but another person –

Tara: Are you scared at the moment? Tell me the truth! I don't want to know about the Triads, just be honest, are you saying -

*All shouting at once*

Caroline: Just listen!

Samia: But when this is going on so close, you know? I live in Norwood and it's just happening across a couple of miles away, and it also makes me think: for another person who does not know this place, never been there, why would they want to go there when they have heard these things? And they have heard all these rapes, murders, shootings, you know, on the news, why would they –

*All shouting at once*

In another focus group, the only boy who does not identify with Brixton is not so confident. After a discussion about prejudice towards Brixton, Edwin, a very shy 13-year-old African-Caribbean boy, says "I think Brixton is a bad area, sometimes". Although I did not pick it up during the interview, I realised when transcribing the tape that Cliff, an assertive black British boy, hissed "traitor" at Edwin almost under his breath. This is highly informative. Supporting or rejecting a version of Brixton is more than describing a place: one's perspective of Brixton reveals one's affiliation, loyalty and identity.

### 1.3. Representation or reality?

In the above two sections I have illustrated how both insiders and neighbours say that 'Brixton is Bad', but that this means quite different things to them. For insiders Brixton is bad in representation; for neighbours Brixton is bad in reality. The following exchange

between Katrina, a neighbour, and Neena, an insider, illustrates this divergence in perspective:

Katrina: Let's go back to what Neena was saying: Neena was saying "Don't blame the media". It's true. Don't blame the media, because, why should the media try and make Brixton sound any good when Brixton's got so many things bad.

Neena: I know, I said "Don't blame the media", Kat, but please don't twist what I said. But you can't put all the blame on Brixton. Some of the blame goes to the media. Because of those youths they big it up (*act tough*) and then the media say 'ALL black youths are exactly like that'. Which is not true, it's not even a majority, but they pick on black youth that come from Brixton.

We saw in the previous chapter that neighbours use negative representations of Brixton in co-constructing identities as *not*-from-Brixton, and that insiders manipulate social representations in creating and defending a positive version of the area in which they live. Are we seeing the same dialectic of identification and re-presentation here? Do neighbours develop social representations of Brixton as a bad place to confirm their disassociation from it? Do insiders fiercely oppose such representations as a way of maintaining a positive self-image? This is part of the story, I believe. However, to assume that these stories of crime and poverty are simply constructed discourses, and unfounded in material life, would be a nonsense.

While social representations help us make sense of the world in which we live they are not disconnected from this world. They are the basis of the social construction of reality. The problem of defining what is real relates to our identities, our interests, and our hopes (Godelier, 1986). Everyone plays a part in staking a claim to knowing what is real. This is a key role of the labour of representation – to establish what is real. Representations do not simply equate to reality, as Hall has pointed out (Grossberg, 1986), but, at the same time, they cannot be severed from reality. With reference to Hall's theory of representation, Fiske (1996) explains: "To the extent that representations are real in their effects, they produce what passes for real in any particular conditions" (p.214).

The statistics given in Appendix II support a salient representation of Brixton as a place of high crime. Insiders may find it difficult to admit experiences and fear of crime in front of their peers as they know this may be seen as betraying Brixton. Salote, a shy black Nigerian girl, said very little during her focus group, for example. Afterwards, however, as she was showing me the way out, she said that she did not like living in Brixton as her home had been burgled a few times. She added that her mother wanted the family to leave soon as her brother had been badly beaten up recently.

Stories such as this demonstrate that there is a lived reality to the representation of Brixton as rough. What is significant here, is that social representations re-present reality in ways that are not exact replications of that reality. Social representations are not mirror images of the world: “when social subjects construct and organise their representational fields”, Jovchelovitch (1996) has observed, “they do so to make sense of reality, to appropriate it and interpret it” (p.125). Thus, social representations both reflect and inform reality. They are born in a real, concrete world and they are embedded within the social construction of this world. Reality, Thomas (1918) informs us, is what we define as reality. Moscovici (1993) has argued that we define reality through the negotiation of social representations. Social representations thus comprise the interface between re-presentation and reality; they bridge our objective and subjective realities. As Jovchelovitch (1996) has explained:

The interplay between subjective and objective, and between agency and reproduction, which constitutes the social fabric is at the very heart of how social representations are formed. (p.123)

Lewis (1994) has argued that “meaning is not the property of or reducible to objects or subjects; it is socially constructed and historically specific. The signifier (object) signifies nothing on its own but requires somebody to interpret it” (p. 22). In other words, the signifier becomes meaningful through the process of social re-presentation. However, meaning is not arbitrarily fabricated from nowhere. Meaning is rooted in a material world. Once we understand this “the distinction between the material and the mental” dissolves, Godelier (1986) has argued. As Jovchelovitch’s powerful critique (1996) of the radical

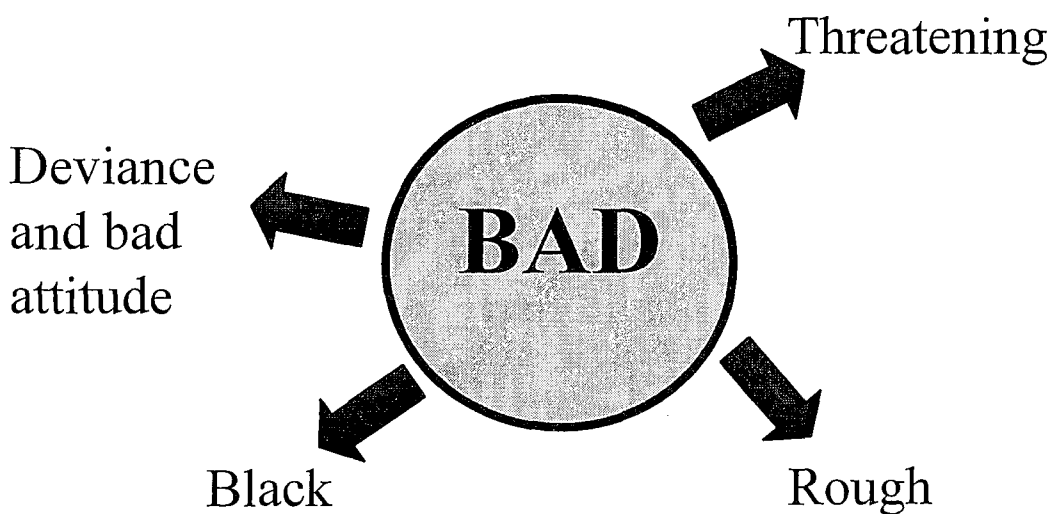


social constructionism of Gergen (with Davis, 1985) and Shotter (1993) demonstrates, a theory of representation that does not recognise this is politically impotent.

Both insiders and neighbours use the representation Brixton as Bad. As with the representation Brixton as Diverse, insiders and neighbours use the representation in different ways: neighbours use it unproblematically as a reflection of reality; insiders dispute it as a stereotype of Brixton that they do not support. Whichever the case - reputation or reality - the structure of the social representation remains the same. I shall now go on to describe the representation in detail. It is important to bear in mind that the material used in this description is drawn from both insiders and neighbours.

## 2. The Social Representation: Brixton is Bad

What emerged from the analysis, described in Chapter Five, is that, when people in Brixton decode media constructions of the area, they uncover a representation of Brixton as ‘bad’. This core of ideas on ‘badness’ was supported by peripheral information (Abric, 1993). Stories and examples told in the focus groups and inter-views showed that the central theme, ‘bad’, is supported by four key arguments: Brixton is black; Brixton is threatening; Brixton is rough; Brixton is deviant and has “bad attitude”. In describing this complex, contested and highly mobile representation I have simplified these main elements into the diagram below.



### 2.1. Rough: “Brixton is a gangster’s paradise!”

This is a sarcastic comment from Louise. She maintains that this is how outsiders perceive Brixton. All children in the study gave similar accounts, whether or not they considered it to be an accurate description of the area. Many gave similar replies to the following:

Caroline: OK, let’s talk about the reputation. ... For people who don’t know Brixton at all, what do you think they think of?

Winston: Muggings, drugs, poor people, homeless people - all the bad things that you can think of.

When I asked adolescents what it meant to say that “Brixton is bad”, they would explain that “there is a lot of trouble and crime” in the area (Cheng). Ien, an older Chinese girl, defines Brixton as “an inner city place; it can be described as quite rough at times”. Insiders maintain that the media exaggerate the problem of crime and violence in Brixton. While it is true that there are higher levels of crime reported here than in most parts of London (see Appendix II) - “it’s not really as bad as people think” (Grace). As another older Chinese girl explains:

Weona: People make it sound worse than it is. Because you know when you get people that come down here that are not used to the area, all carrying on, you know ‘you are going to get mugged as soon as you step in the street’. It is not true.

For those who seek to establish and to defend their difference from Brixton, these things *are* true. One black neighbour, for example, claims that people in Brixton are unafraid of violence as it is “an everyday thing” (Katrina). This echoes the views of SH2 who stated that shootings are “just their day-to-day lives, you know. It’s what they expect. It’s what they know.”

Neighbours denigrate Brixton by validating this representation with their own stories of violence and intimidation. Such storytelling and personalisation of accounts are common discursive strategies in establishing and defending your perspective over others (Van Dijk, 1993). In the all-neighbour focus group, for example, the boys tell many stories of witnessing and experiencing violence in Brixton. Here is one example:

Winston: Liam got robbed there, he got robbed!

Liam: I got robbed.

Caroline: Oh, you got robbed?

Paul: We all got robbed!

Caroline: Tell me the story, Liam.

Liam: I went round Slay Gardens (an area in Brixton), during lunch time, and it's at the end of lunch, I am coming back, yeah, and there's this whole crowd of boys, yeah, and one of them comes up to me and robs, me, yeah, £5, yeah!

For neighbours Brixton is “so dangerous” (Paul) and thus deserves its negative reputation. They reject the claim that Brixton’s problems are exaggerated; as Winston says, “Brixton is bad, so why shouldn’t people say it?” For some insiders, by contrast, Brixton’s reputation as drug-ridden and violent encourages criminals to the area. So the representation of Brixton as Bad becomes the reality that Brixton *is* rough. In an all-insider group, these boys explain:

Dean: People from Streatham come to Brixton, people from Clapham come to Brixton. Those that want to fight. They all come down to Brixton, well, obviously to start trouble, or to try like, to try to come like -

Elliot: They better, they bigger -

Dean: Yeah, they better.

Malcolm: To fight.

Caroline: Who thinks that?

Elliot: Other people cos people that hear that our area is bad, so they will think ‘oh, we’ll, could be better than our area, worse like, like acting in behaviour and stuff, so like they come round and they just want to pick on us, pick on people. You understand? To start trouble, so that the two areas will fight.

Malcolm: Cos like in Brixton, yeah, Brixton will get a bad name for that!

Thus Brixton is rough either in terms of reputation or reality, depending on one’s perspective on Brixton. Those who seek to defend a positive image of their home and themselves stress the point that this is an undeserved stereotype. For those children who do

not see themselves as Brixtonites, this representation is a reflection of reality. What is interesting is that for some it is both.

## 2.2. “Brixton is a black community”

The themes ‘crime’ and ‘black people’ tend to be articulated together when discussing Brixton (Hall, 1997b). Even though black people are said to make up less than 50% of the Brixton population (Lambeth Statistics, 1999), it is often described as a “black community” in the media. For many, “black” translates into “bad”. This is by no means peculiar to Brixton. Across many discourses, in different contexts, and “for many centuries, western societies have associated the word black with everything that is dark, evil, forbidding, devilish, dangerous and sinful”, as Hall (1997b) has illustrated in his own work on representations of black people (p. 32). “Because people see black people as a bad thing”, a mixed-heritage girl explains, and people have “those ideas of Brixton being such a bad place ... they kind of put them together” (Riva). This black insider makes a similar point:

Pauline: It’s alright to walk there in Brixton in the daytime, but at night time, you see a lot of people on the streets, right, and that’s when you start getting scared. You will hear in the community, yeah, you know, at night - people say that blacks, yeah, blacks - but all, um, blacks and whites do criminal things. It’s not just blacks that are criminal. People worry that them going to bump them, going to shoot them. Violence is white and Asians and Indians too. But they think it’s just blacks sometimes.

Just as the representation of Brixton as rough may in fact lead to criminal activities in the area, as I explained above, so, for some insiders, the expectation that black Brixtonites are aggressive becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (as I explore in the following chapter). This extract below shows that, for some, black people *are* more violent than whites, while for others, black people *are seen to be* more violent. Both these boys describe themselves as Black British.

Dean: Black people in Brixton - they are more violent than the white people.

Connor: They *seem* more violent!

Dean: White people think about what they do, and white people are not violent. They like try to help -

Caroline: What do you mean, “they seem more violent”, Connor?

Connor: Well, it’s like what other people portray them as. They see them as violent, as then the black they might not be violent to start off with, and then they will be violent because they start portraying them like that. They get annoyed with other people saying that ‘you’re violent’. So then they will become violent, you know.

Social representations not only describe reality, but they come to shape it. Disparaging representations of Brixton as bad, as rough, as violent, permeate the social construction of Brixton and the identities of those living in its reach. The representation of a black youth as ‘mugger’ or ‘rioter’ is evident in many discourses on ‘race’ (Back, 1996). What is pertinent to this thesis is that representations may be so hegemonic (Moscovici, 1988) that they become reality, as Mercer (1994) also has found:

This regime of representation is reproduced and maintained in hegemony because black men have had to resort to ‘toughness’ as a defensive response to the prior aggression and violence that characterises the way black communities are policed. ... This cycle between representation and reality makes the ideological fiction of racism empirically ‘true’. (pp. 137-8).

### 2.3. Brixton is threatening

Saying that ‘Brixton is bad’ means that “everyone is scared of Brixton” (Louise). Fear is a common reaction to Brixton, according to insiders, as Jayna explains:

Caroline: So, people who don’t know, who haven’t been to Brixton very much and just hear about it though the press or on the TV, things like that, what kind of idea have they got of Brixton?

Jayna: It’s bad, bad, it’s bad. Some people in my class haven’t been to Brixton (*laughter*) Cos Cathy ain’t never been to Brixton before, and when we were going through Brixton, like someone said to her ‘this is Brixton’, and she was like *petrified!* There is nothing to be frightened of! It’s only, it’s a normal place, just like you go to Camberwell, Camberwell is just a normal place, nothing to be frightened of.

Those who present themselves as neighbours to Brixton sometimes admit that they are intimidated when in Brixton. While some say that they are afraid of crime, it was more common for people to link fear of Brixton with the presence of black people. For example, this Chinese girl who lives in central Brixton, honestly explains:

Weona: Yeah, because the majority of black in Brixton are so much bigger than, I would say, than white people, or other sort of race. I think a lot of other people feel quite intimidated. I mean, I know people who do, who just live on the outskirts of Brixton, but maybe the more white areas, the white built-up areas, if they came into Brixton they wouldn't feel so comfortable.

Black children themselves realise that they may intimidate non-black people:

Louise: And also, I think that people are afraid of us because we all stick together.

Caroline: Who sticks together?

Louise: All of the black people, the black community stick together.

Some insiders believe that Brixton is threatening not only because it is black, but also because it is diverse. This was apparent in the previous chapter, *Making Sense of Brixton's Diversity*. Insiders describe how Brixton's mix of cultures, peoples, beliefs and practices make it, in the eyes of outsiders, dangerous. Vicky realises this:

Vicky: The thing that they say 'if you are different, you're bad', is not necessarily true. Cos we are different but that doesn't mean to say that we are bad, because you don't want to be categorised all in the same thing: everybody wants to be different, and that makes us bad, which it doesn't. It shouldn't make us like that.

Chapter Six demonstrated that Brixton does not fit easily into social categories: it is black and mixed; it is British and foreign; it is 'up-and-coming' and is one of the most socially deprived areas in London (Lambeth Statistics, 1999); it is threatening and alluring. It hovers reluctantly between these categories in what Hall (1997a) calls "some unstable, dangerous, hybrid zone of indeterminacy in-between" (p. 236). Because it is ambiguous, it can be disturbing. Through the representation 'Brixton is bad' the area is portrayed as a threat to other communities, and a threat to the imagined homogeneity of wider society. A plural notion of Britishness threatens to destabilise "a definition of Englishness imbued with an imperial past" (Back, 1996, p. 249). As such Brixton contains many "threatening forms of

cultural hybridity” (Morley and Robins, 1995, p. 8). Multiculturalism decentres the anglo-centrism of our culture.

#### 2.4. People in Brixton have “bad attitude”

Insiders claim that Brixton’s reputation extends far beyond their neighbourhood. They see the media as responsible for encouraging heavily loaded racist representations of the area. They retell stories of prejudice experienced in other parts of London, Britain and even overseas, that they believe stems from the perception that they are ‘from-Brixton’. The media, they suggest, encode portrayals of people from Brixton with images of strangeness and deviance. One black dual heritage girl gives this example:

Tara: Listen to this. I went to France, and they have some public toilets, right? And there was a man right, sitting there, checking the queue, right. Like we went with the church, so we were like, most, there was three white girls, five black kids, and two Asians, and there was a woman, and the man goes “you lot be quiet”. He was English. “You lot be quiet”. And he says to the woman “Where are you from?” And she goes “Oh, we are from Brixton”. And he goes “Figures - errr, thought so”. It’s like, excuse me! “Why do you think we come from Brixton?” “No reason, just thought so”. She started an argument with the man. But she probably knew that he thinks that everybody rowdy, everybody this, they must come from Brixton, they are loud, they must come from Brixton. If you are *bad*, if you cause trouble, if you are in trouble with the police, you must come from Brixton!

Children who do not identify with Brixton display the kind of prejudiced views that insiders may experience. In the all-neighbour focus group, the boys quickly paint a picture of a disgusting and disturbing place full of strange and frightening people with “bad attitude” (Tom). As we saw in the previous chapter, neighbours describe Brixtonites as hostile, criminal and mad (Katrina). Neighbours stress that there are “a lot of mentally ill people” in Brixton (Jack), and give a lot of examples of eccentric behaviour and dress. For example, take the very first few minutes of the all-neighbour focus group, which rapidly links mugging, strange and bizarre behaviour, over-crowding, and mental illness.

Caroline: The important thing is that you know Brixton and you have been there.

Tom: I don't really like Brixton that much -

Theo: There is too much mugging there.

Jack: Too many weird people there. Too crowded. People with snakes!

Winston: I hate it when you can't walk past the people, hardly.

*All talking at once*

Caroline: Listen, listen! If you all talk at the same time, then I can't understand what you are saying. Yeah? So, let's start again: so I don't know Brixton very well, so can you explain to me what Brixton is like?

Paul: The Pizza Hut in Brixton, yeah, when you walk past there, you see all these nutcases standing outside. And you see them wetting themselves. Remember that time when I walked past some man and he burped in my ear, man, and it was loud! I hate going there, man!

From this extract it is possible to see how the two dominant representations of Brixton (as Diverse and as Bad) are interrelated. The insistence on 'badness' is related to the threat of difference. "People think that different is bad" some insiders realised (Vicky). The connections between representations of diversity and representations of badness relate to how people who live in the vicinity of Brixton co-construct identities, and hence are dealt with in more detail in the next chapter where I examine *The Struggle for Recognition and Esteem*.

In this section above I have explored how those living in the area of Brixton decode media representations of Brixton. According to these, Brixton is generally portrayed as rough, black, threatening and deviant. In order to fully understand their argument we need to examine portrayals of Brixton in the media. Decoding and encoding are fundamentally interrelated processes in the production, mediation and interpretation of media representations. In the following section, I turn my attention to encoding, the process by which programmes are imbued with dominant codes.



### 3. Analysing the Media

What Brixton is, how both insiders and neighbours experience it, and how children living in the area position themselves in relation to Brixton cannot be fully understood without reference to media representations of the area. This extract from the opening few minutes of a focus group, with predominantly older Chinese girls, illustrates the power of the media in the social construction of Brixton:

Caroline: And so if you were to describe Brixton to someone like me, who doesn't know Brixton very well, yeah, to someone who doesn't know Brixton, how would you describe it?

Weona: Go and watch the news!

As I argue throughout this thesis, to research the symbolic construction of a community requires a dialectical approach: how the community is explained from the perspective of insider needs to be understood in conjunction with how the community is perceived by neighbours. Chapter Six, *Making Sense of Brixton's Diversity*, examined how those living in the general area of Brixton explain their everyday experiences in the area. The current chapter is focused on perceptions of Brixton. The aim is far from modest in its scope: it is to reveal how a media programme on Brixton may develop, support and challenge perceptions of Brixton.

#### 3.1. A bifocal analysis

Morley (1992) has suggested that those who study audiences should have two foci:

1. The text and “the internal structures and mechanisms of the text/message/programme which invite certain cultural meanings and block others” and
2. The audience and “the cultural background of the reader/recipient/viewer, which has to be studied sociologically” (p. 75).

My research has reversed this order. I began with a social psychological study of adolescents living within the same area, then found that media representations are crucial to the formation of community identities and, consequently, moved onto an analysis of a media text about the area. I would suggest that any thorough study of present-day contested

identities should involve an analysis of media representations. This is a common occurrence in empirical studies of social representations (e.g. Gervais, 1997; Haroun, 1997; Imtiaz, forthcoming; Jovchelovitch, 1995; Marková and Farr, 1995, Moscovici, 1961).

A textual analysis of a documentary without some audience research would tell us little of the social psychological significance of such a text. It would not tell us how the programme is interpreted, evaluated or challenged, or what its consequence may be in everyday life. “Without evidence, in other words, a textual analysis (no matter how ingenious) tells us little about how media influence people” (Lewis, 1994, p. 20). To understand how media messages are taken up by viewers, negotiated or opposed, we need a bifocal analysis, examining media representations in conjunction with what people say about them.

The textual analysis of this thesis primarily narrows the focus onto a particular documentary, as justified in Chapter Three. The wider media coverage of Brixton (in the print media, magazine articles, and *brixton online*, for example) and outsiders’ perceptions of Brixton (as revealed in conversations in the course of participant-observation) provide the backdrop to this analysis. Appendix III, *Reflections on Earlier Research: the 1995 Brixton ‘Riot’*, also mentions media coverage of Brixton in relation to the 1995 Brixton ‘riot’. The work presented here, in this chapter, is supported by wider knowledge of the media portrayal of Brixton from this date (December 1995) to the present (December 1999). The documentary programme is examined in the light of this wider framework, incorporating both insiders’ and neighbours’ views of media representations of Brixton. My interest is to consider the extent to which media representations confirm dominant social representations of Brixton.

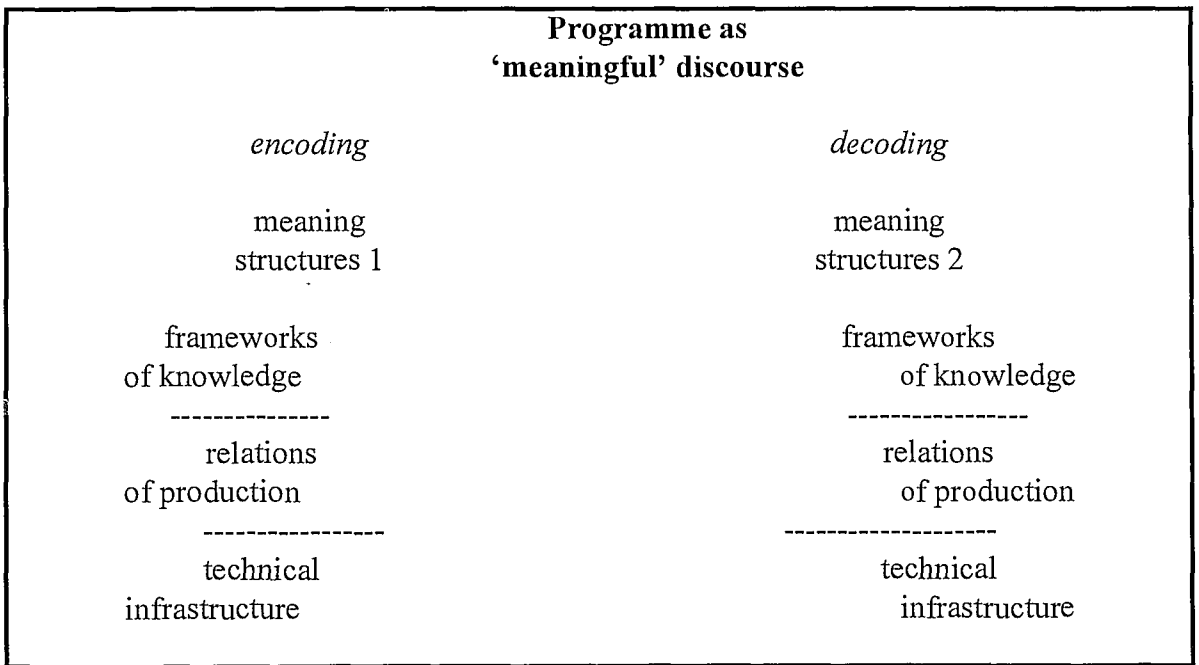
### 3.2. Encoding/decoding: An illustration

“To study communication is to examine the actual social process wherein significant symbolic forms are created, apprehended, and used” (Carey, 1989, p. 30). For my study, this would involve researching the production of the documentary (how, that is, a producer has ‘encoded’ it with certain privileged meanings), the reception of the programme (how

audiences ‘decode’ the programme) and an examination of how these codes are actively or passively interpreted in the co-construction of identities. That is, it would follow the ‘encoding/decoding’ model developed by Hall (1996, as summarised below).

Clearly such a study would be an extensive doctorate in its own right. I have not extended the media analysis this far. My question remains, *how is Brixton lived?* How those living in Brixton understand media representations of their area and what consequences these have for their negotiation of identities are the central foci. The analysis of this documentary serves as supporting evidence for the theoretical perspective I am developing. It is an illustration, embedded in and extending beyond the empirical material, theoretical arguments and related literature presented thus far.

*From Hall (1996: Encoding/decoding)*



As Hall (1996) himself has acknowledged, this diagram is in part misleading:

The encoding moment doesn’t come from nowhere. I make a mistake by drawing that bloody diagram with only the top half. You see, if you’re doing a circuit, you must draw a circuit; so I must show how decoding enters practice and discourses which a reporter is picking up on (p. 260).

This thinking influences my analysis of media representations of Brixton. Social representations of Brixton circulate in the media, other social institutions and everyday interactions. Producers and reporters pick up on these and manipulate them in conveying certain messages. Audiences, too, use these in making sense of these messages. Thus, there is a dialectical relationship between encoding and decoding. This is not to say that audiences and those in the media use the same codes in the same ways to interpret media texts. Some viewers may accept the dominant media representations, while others develop negotiated or oppositional representations, as I describe below.

### 3.3. The politics of representation

In doing a media analysis there are many schools of thought on which one can draw: semiotic (Barthes, 1968), reception (Morley, 1995), ideological (Glasgow University Media Group, 1993), ritual (Carey, 1989), for example. All of these approaches inform this study to varying degrees. In terms of the media, the original research question, *how is Brixton lived?*, translates into what are the consequences of media representations of Brixton for those who live in the vicinity of Brixton? Because the relationship between representations of the community and community identities is my central concern – a discursive approach is the most productive. This approach “is more concerned with the effects and consequences of representation – its ‘politics’. It examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constrains identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practised and studied” (Hall, 1997a, p.6). Thus, for this study there are three main questions to address. How does the programme about Brixton -

1. Connect with power relations?
2. Confirm and constrain identities and subjectivities?
3. Influence the way Brixton is re-presented, thought about, practised and studied?

The broadest of these questions, concerning power, is addressed when I return to the larger issue of the ideological construction of communities in the concluding chapter. The

following chapter, *The Struggle for Recognition and Esteem*, examines the effects which media representations have on the co-construction of identities. The last of these three questions, on representation itself, is dealt with here in the rest of this chapter.

Viewing a documentary, news broadcast, or soap opera, is not a straightforward task. The ‘meaning’ of a media text does not exist, unproblematically, within the text for the viewer to extract, examine and evaluate. Some of the early work within media studies assumed such a simplistic producer - text – receiver model (Livingstone, 1998) with “an emphasis on the viewer as *tabula rasa*, as someone wide open just waiting to soak up all that is beamed at him” (Halloran, 1997, p.266). Early studies often supported “the idea that the media maintain hegemony, reproducing the dominant views of the ruling powers which are then transferred to and uncontested by the mass audience” (Aron, 1998, p. 298). Television was seen as “a kind of megaphone by which ruling ideas are amplified and generalised across all sectors of the social formation” (Connell, 1996, p. 139).

What is now acknowledged is that people bring with them social knowledge, past experiences and belief systems that help them decode and interpret what they watch and read (e.g. Cruz and Lewis, 1994; Morley and Robins, 1995; Silverstone, 1994). “The meaning of the television message is not fixed,” as Lewis (1994) has pointed out, “but neither is it arbitrary. It is determined by the viewer’s semiotic environment, which includes the viewer’s history, neighbourhood, and class and of course television itself” (p. 25). From the theory of social representations, social psychologists know that people use their already existing social representations to make sense of what they encounter in both everyday and unusual interactions (Moscovici, 1981a). Thus it comes as no surprise to learn from media theorists that cultural contexts, social identities and inter-group membership all influence the reception of media programmes. Because of these shared assumptions Rose (1996) sees that “of all theories in social psychology the theory of social representations is best equipped to analyse the media” (p. 309).

### 3.4. Polysemic interpretations and dominant representations

In his book on the interpretation of art, *Ways of Seeing*, Berger (1972) has shown that “the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (p. 8). What this means is that different people, differently positioned, will interpret media messages in a variety of ways. Different people from Brixton, from other parts of London, from rural communities outside of London, from other countries even, may understand media representations of Brixton in a variety of ways. As Morley (1995) has argued:

... the message in social communication is always complex in structure and form. It always contains more than one potential ‘reading’. Messages propose and prefer certain readings to others, but they cannot be entirely around one reading: they remain polysemic” (p.300).

However, while it is very possible that different people could find different meanings in the same programme, “all meanings do not exist ‘equally’ in the message” (Morley, 1992, p.86). Just as we do not want a “false picture of the all-powerful influence of television presented to us”, Halloran (1997) warns, “we now run the risk of getting an equally false picture of no influence whatsoever” (pp. 266-7). It is vital to recognise that there are dominant meanings that diminish the viability of alternative interpretations. Through my ongoing interest in Brixton and discussions with many outsiders to the area, I realised that there are indeed dominant representations that insiders find difficult to challenge. This is “testimony to our tightly controlled cultural horizons” (Lewis, 1994, pp. 25-26).

Throughout this research I have met many outsiders to Brixton whose knowledge of Brixton is formed mainly through media reports. I have been astounded by the homogeneity of representations about Brixton held by people of different nationalities living in London (for example, Australians, Brazilians, Chinese, Germans, Jamaicans, South Africans, Ukrainians), people living across Britain (in the places I frequent: Gloucestershire, Sussex, Yorkshire and Wales), as well as people abroad (whom I have met whilst travelling in Italy, Spain and Mexico, for example). While it is remarkable that Brixton is so famous, it is disturbing that the dominant response of so many is that “Brixton is a bad place to go” (outsider from New Zealand).

While these reports from outsiders form the backdrop to this study, they are not at the heart of my concern. My emphasis here is on how those who live in the general area of Brixton interpret these messages. The crucial question concerns the consequences which media representations have for the construction of identity. Those adolescents who identify with Brixton, and so are keen to defend a positive image of Brixton, have a very different view of media representations of the area than those adolescents who distance themselves from Brixton. Affirming, negotiating or opposing media portrayals of Brixton is a way of developing and strengthening one's relationship with the community. Let us examine this in detail.

#### 4. An Illustration: Electric Avenue

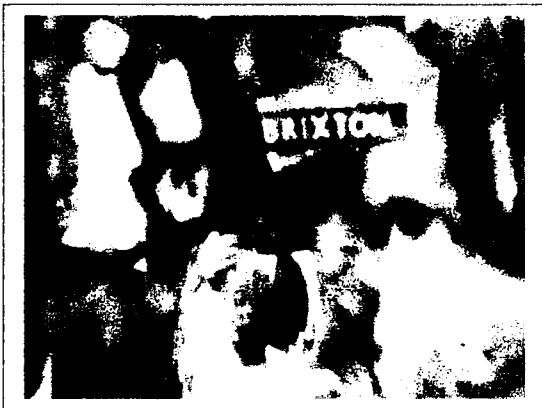
Most mention of Brixton on television is in the news, as children in the study explained (e.g. Ien). These items tend to be about shootings, drugs-related crimes, policing and the Brixton riots. It is easy to see how these stories can confirm stereotypes that Brixton is Bad. However, as the children recognised, the nature of news often makes for negative presentations through the concentration on issues relating to crime, violence and drugs. Thus television news is not the most useful source for a study of the power of social representations in defining and stigmatising an area. If we are going to understand this, we need to examine a genre that is less rigid in its structure and more open to positive images (Livingstone, 1998).

Apart from the news, there are few references to Brixton in television in general. However, in April 1999 there was a notable exception: *Electric Avenue*, a documentary series about people in Brixton, shown on *Channel Four*. Choosing this to analyse proved highly informative.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to both *Channel Four* and *RDF Television* for giving me permission to use this programme in my analysis.

Each programme in *Electric Avenue* focuses on a different character and their close friends, colleagues and family. Initially there were to be five 30-minute programmes shown over five weeks. However, the producer told me that “for legal reasons” the last two were cut.<sup>2</sup> The idea of a *collage* of personal experiences from different viewpoints is emphasised in the graphics of the title:



Multiple images of Brixton are superimposed onto a picture of Electric Avenue - Brixton's famous street.

The film crew followed the selected subjects over the course of several months and filmed the interactions, excursions, arguments, achievements and disappointments of their day-to-day lives. As a type of documentary it falls somewhere between observational documentary “where the filmmaker can ‘be around’ the action and somehow let it speak for itself” and a more interactive model “where the filmmakers want to become more involved with what was happening” (Ferguson, 1998, p. 191). For much of the programme the film crew appear simply to be filming events with no direct input into what is done or said. At other times, often when the central character is pictured alone, an unseen interviewer directs the topics discussed.

Because of the invisibility of the interviewer and film crew their influence on the construction of events is hidden, as is generally the case in documentaries (Aron, 1998). Just as news stories masquerade “as literal visual-transcriptions of the ‘real world’” and

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<sup>2</sup> One was to be about a re-offending criminal and the other focused on the local characters who hang round the tube station. People filmed for both of these programmes were subsequently questioned by the police in relation to criminal activities. Hence, neither programme was shown (information from the producer).



“news photos operate under a hidden sign marked, ‘this really happened, see it for yourself” (Hall, 1981, p. 241), observational documentaries appear to witness interactions ‘as they really are’ or the “being there” of an object (Barthes, 1977, p.23) without the influence of the selecting, directing, filming, and editing that constitutes the programme. The less obvious the mechanics of production, the more ‘objective’ the programme appears. Hence, through this analysis we shall continue to consider the dialectic of reality/representation.

The second programme shown in the series centres on a 15-year-old girl, Stacey, her friends, family and school. This programme is of direct relevance to this thesis: there are many common themes, including anti-social behaviour, self-confidence, and multicultural education. Additionally, it deals with adolescents from the school where I began my research and includes one of the head teachers I had previously interviewed. Because of the obvious parallels between this particular film and the lives of the adolescents in my study, I decided to focus on this one programme. However, I agree with the producer that to view one programme is “unrepresentative” of the whole series. Therefore, before exploring Stacey’s programme, I shall briefly describe all three shown programmes. This is so that the reader can fit this programme about Stacey into the wider picture of the series as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

#### 6 April 1999: ‘Vincent’s Opening Night’

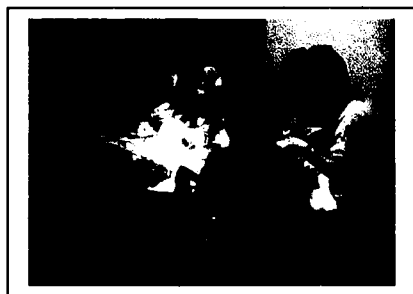
This was the first programme in the series. It follows Vincent, a black entrepreneur, and Garth, an inept black builder, through the building and opening of ‘The Brixtonian’, “an upmarket cocktail bar and restaurant”. Most of the interaction is between Vincent and Garth, as they face increasing problems in finishing the building work, are forced to postpone the opening date several times, and the sacking of Garth, shortly before the actual opening night. The Brixtonian appears as a model of the gentrification of Brixton, with Vincent as a flamboyant example of the emerging black middle classes.

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<sup>3</sup> A copy of these programmes is available on request.

On the whole, Brixton is represented as an area ‘on the up’ despite a troubled past, where ‘the Brixton riot’ now refers to an exotic, expensive cocktail. For example, at a dinner party with Vincent’s family there is discussion of the fact that “attitudes of people in and outside of Brixton have changed towards Brixton” (member of Vincent’s family), and that ‘Brixton village’ is becoming an increasingly desirable place to buy property. This optimism is slightly marred by the representation of this business venture as an exception to the norm in Brixton, and a fight against the odds. Here are key scenes from the programme:

(Below the pictures I have given the time of the still, e.g. the first picture occurred at 2 minutes and 28 seconds into the programme about Vincent.)



02:28 Dinner party



14:00 The Brixtonian



15:53 Vincent

In terms of confirming or challenging the dominant social representations, this programme does both to a limited degree. Vincent, his family and Garth represent Brixton’s diverse black population, relying on the support of white and Asian backers. There is some confirmation of the stereotype that Brixtonites are exotic and aggressive through Vincent’s melodramatic personality and Garth’s quick temper and bad language. On the whole, however, the focus is on these individuals and not Brixton as a whole.

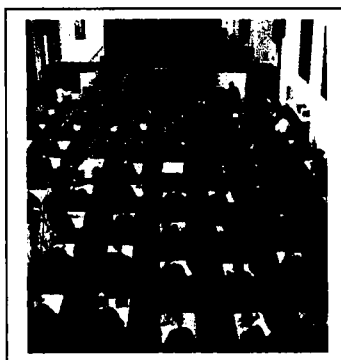
### 13 April 1999: ‘Stacey and the Buff Bay Crew’

This is the story of Stacey, a 15-year-old teenager, her five friends, her family and her school. There are two main themes to the documentary – first, her social activities, such as a concert, hanging out in the street, a christening and an excursion to Thorpe Park amusement park, and, second, her progress at school, which consists of revising for

examinations, sitting them, awaiting the results and receiving them. This programme is explored in depth below.



06:13 'Hanging out' in Brixton



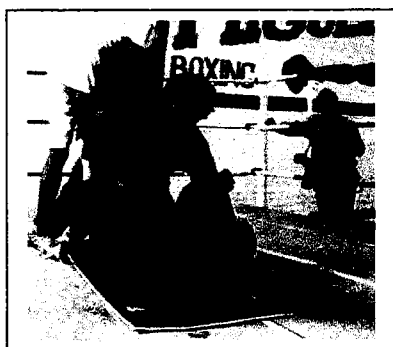
01:54 Exams



14:23 Stacey

### 20 April 1999: 'Danny and the Fighting Spirit'

This was the third programme in the series. This follows two friends who are professional boxers: Danny Williams who is “Brixton’s most successful boxer just one win away from a world heavy weight fight and a multi-million pound life-style” and Spencer the Spirit Fearon “who is just breaking into professional boxing”.



01:07 Danny training



01:59 Handing out fliers



04: 25 Danny

The documentary covers their preparation for two important fights and their publicity campaigns. It is emphasised many times throughout the programme that they are from Brixton and proud to be so. Danny is described as an ambassador for Brixton, for example, asserting that Brixton has been “given a false image”. These positive comments are spoilt, however, by the focus on fighting, physicality and sweat and the link that is made between these themes and blackness. There are many shots, for example, that contrast the white

managers and backers passively watching and analysing the activity and the black fighters displaying their physical strength and aggression. In this way, an image of Brixton as black, as violent and as dangerous may, for some viewers, be reaffirmed.

#### 4.1. Decoding the programme

Communication is not some pure phenomenon we can discover; there is no such thing as communication to be revealed in nature through some objective method free from the corruption of culture (Carey, 1989, p. 31).

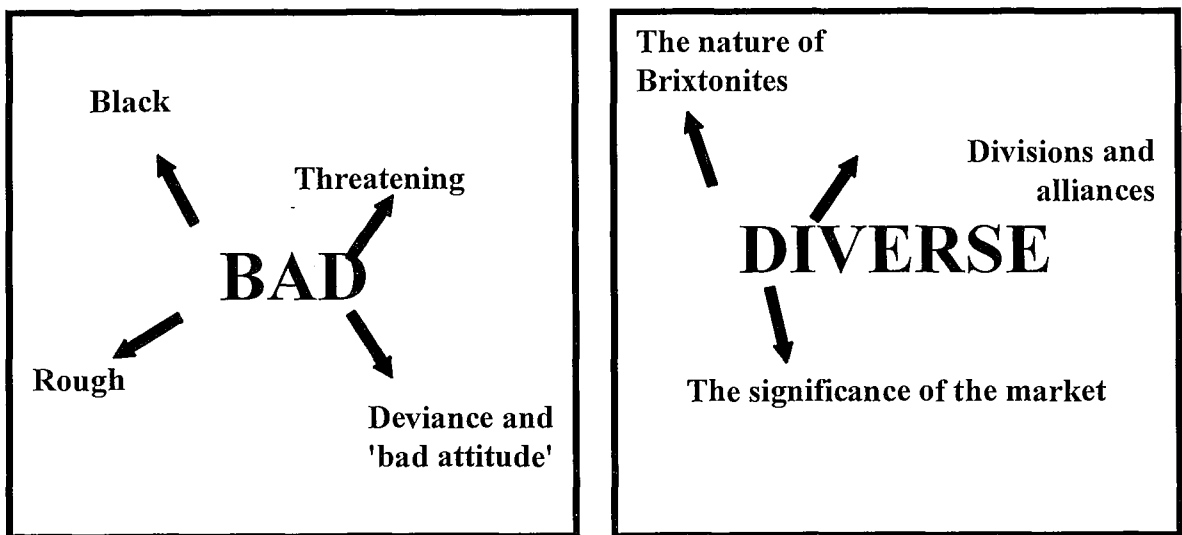
Viewing a programme requires interpretation, or ‘decoding’ through relevant social representations. There is no essence, no universally agreed meaning to a programme as Carey (1989) has convincingly argued. We use the social representations that ‘we already have’ to make sense of what we watch. “Interpretation, as Gadamer would say, is not a presuppositionless activity: it is an active, creative process in which the interpreter brings a set of assumptions and expectations to bear on the message which he or she seeks to understand” (Thompson, 1995, p. 41, with reference to Gadamer, 1975). These “assumptions and expectations” are, to my mind, social representations.

It will be clear, I hope, that those living in Brixton, decode media portrayals of their area through the social representations ‘Brixton is Bad’ and ‘Brixton is Diverse’. This is established before viewing *Electric Avenue*. Obviously representations always relate to, confirm and subvert alternative representations. Representations of Brixton emerge alongside a multitude of distinct representations of other issues. I concentrate mainly on representations of Brixton. I use these social representations as a way of ‘decoding’ the programme. This then shows how this particular media text both confirms and challenges prejudiced views of Brixton.

By looking for recurrent patterns and structures within the text we can consider how the programme may be interpreted in line with the dominant representation ‘Brixton is Bad’ and how it may support ‘negotiated’ and ‘oppositional’ versions. The central question is

how does this documentary confirm the view that the media construct Brixton as Bad? Does it also portray Brixton as Diverse? If so, with what effect?

From my first viewing of the programme, I felt that those in my study would definitely criticise the programme for its juxta-positioning of events, people and associations. Follow-up discussions with students from schools 1 and 3 verified that insiders thought this was “a bad programme” (Danielle). While the intention of the producers was presumably to create a positive, informative and interesting picture of Brixton, the effect was the opposite: extremely negative, uninformative as to the background of the events shown, and not especially intelligible or interesting. It portrayed Brixton and Brixtonites as troublesome, aggressive, noisy and, above all, black. In different ways the programme elaborates on both of these social representations ‘Brixton as Bad’ and ‘Brixton as Diverse’. Let us examine this carefully.



*Core and periphery of the two main social representations*

#### 4.2. People in Brixton: Black or mixed?

“The photographer’s way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subjects” (Berger, 1972, p.10). As with all three programmes in the series, Brixtonites are black. Stacey, her friends, her family, her schoolmates and her teachers are all black. The representation given is of an

almost exclusively black population. There is one section of the film, however, which portrays a more accurate picture of a highly diverse, multi-ethnic population. On Stacey's last day of school, there is an award ceremony. During this the camera focuses on different faces representing different skin-colours and cultures. For example:



Last day of school: 05:07



Three school girls: 05:23, 05:24, 05:32

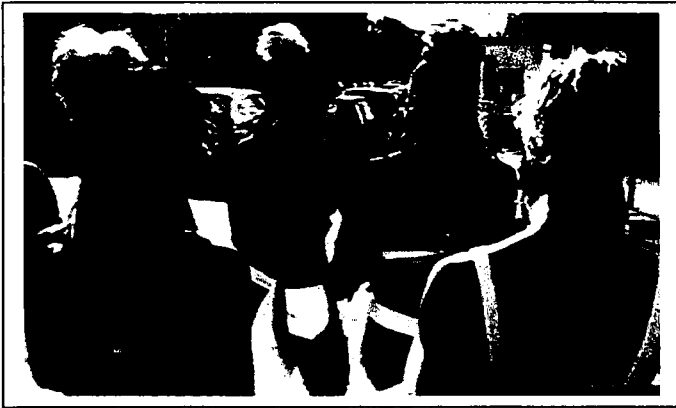
Not only are all the main characters in the series black, but they are filmed in ways that may support racist stereotypes about black people. The start of the programme does this explicitly. The commentator opens with this explanation:

**00:05 – 00:20 Brixton High Street**

Commentator: The Buff Bay Crew: Queens of the Brixton ragga scene. This is the story of their summer. It's a crucial time for Stacey, the eldest. She's 16 and taking her GCSEs and it's revision week.

In stark contrast to this reference to examinations and revision, the visual beginning is of a ragga concert. We first see Stacey and friends dressed up for a ragga concert, dancing and

shouting at the front of the stage. The first minute of the programme is crammed with images of black people, dance, bodies, sex/rape, uncontrolled excitement, and music which bombard the viewer and act as a ‘hook’ to pull in viewers’ attention. Here are some stills from this scene:



00:20 Arriving at concert



00:28 Scare Dem

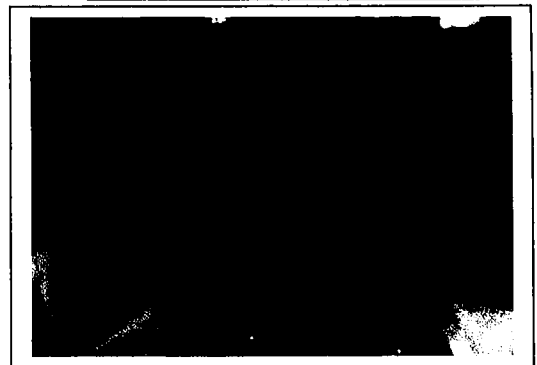


00:43 Singer caught by crowd

Dancers on stage: 00:51



Dancers on stage: 00:57



01:02 Stacey shouting at front of stage

The opening moments of a programme are some of the most informative for the media analyst. They ‘frame’ the programme, hint at what is to come, and, crucially, establish from what perspective the programme has been made (Gamson, 1992). The start of ‘Stacey and the Buff Bay Crew’ associates black people, sexuality, and aggression. This echoes many familiar racist representations of blackness that often contain “a threat of civilisation being over-run or undermined by the recurrence of savagery, which is always lurking beneath the surface; or by an untutored sexuality, threatening to ‘break out’” (Hall, 1997b, p.164). The programme is clearly from an outsider’s perspective, and one that does nothing to challenge negative stereotypes of Brixton.

#### 4.3. Introducing Stacey – a rough past

The main character, Stacey, is clearly a ‘bad’ girl. It is stressed that she has a criminal record, been to three different schools, and is constantly in trouble at home and at school. Her mother, for instance says she is “my trouble, she is, definitely my trouble.” Stacey, herself, explains that:

03:10 – 03:31 Stacey’s bedroom

Stacey: I used to be very bad. And I used always to be on report. All the time. On Head’s report, I was always on report all the time. I was always on report. So she (her mother) used to get fed up of me. And she used to say that she was going to phone social services and tell them to take me away. (*Laughs.*)



03:05 Mother says “Stacey is my trouble”

Throughout the programme there are other references that confirm the image of Stacey as bad. This is an example from early on in the programme:

03:32 – 03:59 Stacey’s bedroom

Unseen interviewer: What about that time around Easter?

Stacey: Yeah. That was probably when I stopped being bad, you know. Cos of going to court and everything. The police told my mum and said that “Your daughter’s for-”, um, (*laughs*), “your daughter’s been arrested for assault and robbery. Please can you come to Kennington Police station and pick her up.”





03:50 Stacey admits “I was arrested by the police!”

03:21 “I used to be very bad”

As SH1 said, “it was a shame the producers chose Stacey”, as it ended up giving a distorted picture of young people in Brixton. One cannot help wondering if this was the reason for Stacey’s selection for the programme: the producers knew of her past, wanted to bring it into the programme, and perhaps felt it would make for entertaining television. What they did not consider, I assume, is the extent to which these references justify claims that Brixton is a rough area, troubled with a population of deviant, criminal black people.

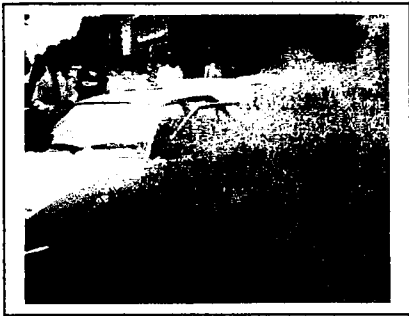
#### 4.4. A demonstration: The threat of violence

The pictures of heavy police presence at a demonstration in Brixton High Street allow for the interpretation that Brixton is a dangerous and volatile area. The commentator explains:

06:13 – 06:23 Brixton High Street

Commentator: The Buff Bay Crew plan to spend the first Saturday of their summer hanging out in Brixton. But today the whole town centre has been invaded by eco-warriors.

In the next 2 minutes, various images - strangely dressed demonstrators, lines of police, people dancing enthusiastically to drum and bass music, and Stacey and her friends protesting to the police officers - merge together. The effect is of a heavily policed, chaotic, noisy and potentially dangerous event that is portrayed as normal for those in Brixton. Brixton, it seems, has the ever-present threat of violence. Take a look at these pictures:



06:20 Orange smoke streaming out of car



06:25 Crowded and chaotic street



06:48 Stacey and friends complain to police



07:00 Stacey and her friends dancing



07:02 Punks dancing in crowd



08:05 Stacey shouting at ecowarrior



8:09 Helicopter surveying scene

08:14 Going home through police lines



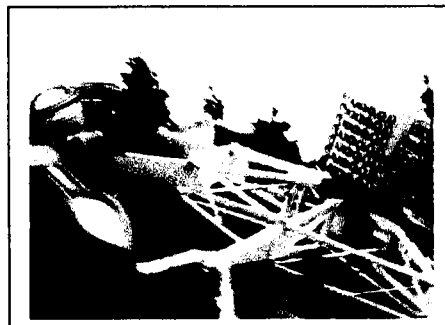
In follow-up discussions with children living in Brixton who had all seen the programme, there was much criticism of this part of the programme in particular. They complained that “now everyone will think Brixton is a bad, bad place full of mad, crazy, dancing people” (Louise). The punks above are some examples of these “mad people, dancing crazy like, dancing in the street” (Pauline). As Danielle pointed out, “there are people like that everywhere, not just Brixton. But they make it look like it is a Brixton thing”.

#### 4.5. Deviant attitudes

Throughout the programme, there are references to Stacey’s troublesome behaviour. A main part of the documentary follows Stacey and her friends on an excursion to Thorpe Park, an amusement park. While this shows that they, like most teenagers, are good at having fun, there is also an emphasis on disregard for conventions and politeness. These pictures may confirm stereotypes of people from Brixton as being loud, deviant, antisocial and perhaps even criminal, as I discuss in the next section.



13:34 Shouting on water slide



13:34 Screaming on Ferris wheel



13:51 Singing and dancing on merry-go-round

13:48 Jumping the barriers

## 5. Stigmatising Brixton

This image of black people “as law-breakers, prone to crime, as ‘trouble’, as the collective agent of civil disorder” is not uncommon in media representations (Hall, 1997b, p.166). It is obviously possible to make alternative readings of *Electric Avenue*, as I consider below. However, as insiders agreed, it is highly likely that these pictures will be anchored in dominant representations of black people that confirm the association: criminality, threat, deviance and blackness (SH3). Media analysts describe such associations as “the accomplishment of a particular combination of discourses which has the effect of fixing certain privileged meanings to the images, binding the two signifying chains together in a ‘specific relation of dominance’” (Morley and Brunson, 1998, p.62). In this way, the representation Brixton as Bad is *preferred*.

### 5.1. The programme “just confirmed stereotypes”

According to SH3 the selection and juxtaposition of images in the documentary confirmed racist stereotypes about Brixton. There is an episode in the film that illustrates this powerfully. When the girls leave Thorpe Park, a fight develops between them and other passengers on a bus. The producers “really shouldn’t have shown that, or at least they should have explained it properly” (according to Danielle, in the follow-up discussions). The commentator explains that “at the bus stop outside Thorpe Park, Stacey’s friends have jumped the queue. One of the passengers goes over to confront them” (14:26 – 14:35). The situation erupts into an extremely angry confrontation between these girls and other members of the public. It is worth examining both the images and the verbal transcript of this scene:



14:28 Queue at bus-stop



14:34 Confrontation on bus

**14: 26 – 16:13 At bus stop, outside Thorpe Park.**

Commentator: At the bus stop outside Thorpe Park, Stacey's friends have jumped the queue. One of the passengers goes over to confront them.

*Lots of people shouting: "sorry, sorry".*

Stacey (shouting): Oya! Oy! Stop! Stop! Oy! Stop!

*There is a fight on the bus. The bus window shakes as it has been violently hit.*

Stacey: Oy! Stop! Oy! Stop! I'm nothin to do with it! What are you pushing me for?

Man: That's your fucking...

Stacey: I'm nothing to do with it! Get off the bus, man! Get off the bus!

*People get up, and prepare to leave the bus.*

Stacey: Come off the bus, man! Come off the bus! Come off the bus, man! Come off the bus! Come off the bus, NOW! I don't know what you lot are doing! Get off the bus! Just get off the bus!

*The girls get off the bus – shouting.*

Girl: (*unintelligibly protesting*) I don't see why I should get off the bus. Cos them bitches, they should get off the bus. I don't see why I should get off the bus!

Stacey: You lot should get off the bus, cos you lot are out of order!

*All shouting aggressively. This is totally unintelligible.*

Girl: She never got off the bus!!

Stacey: No! What did I tell you! You see people standing up there, and you wait for them to get on the bus. How can you just push in front of people and expect them not to do that? All of you lot got on the bus! That's out of order. I'm not saying that Tasha! I'm not saying that! Tasha, Tasha! I'm not justifying that. Tasha, I'm not saying that.

*All shouting – unintelligible.*

Girl: And she had her bag there, and zane, zane, zane, rrruh, ruh, ruh!

*All shouting – unintelligible.*

Girl: She was pushing me, she was pushing me. And I asked her – do not punch in my face, do not punch in my face. And the lady pushes me!

*Another bus arrives.*



15:31 Stacey shouting



15:51 Friend shouting at Stacey



15:59 Two friends shouting



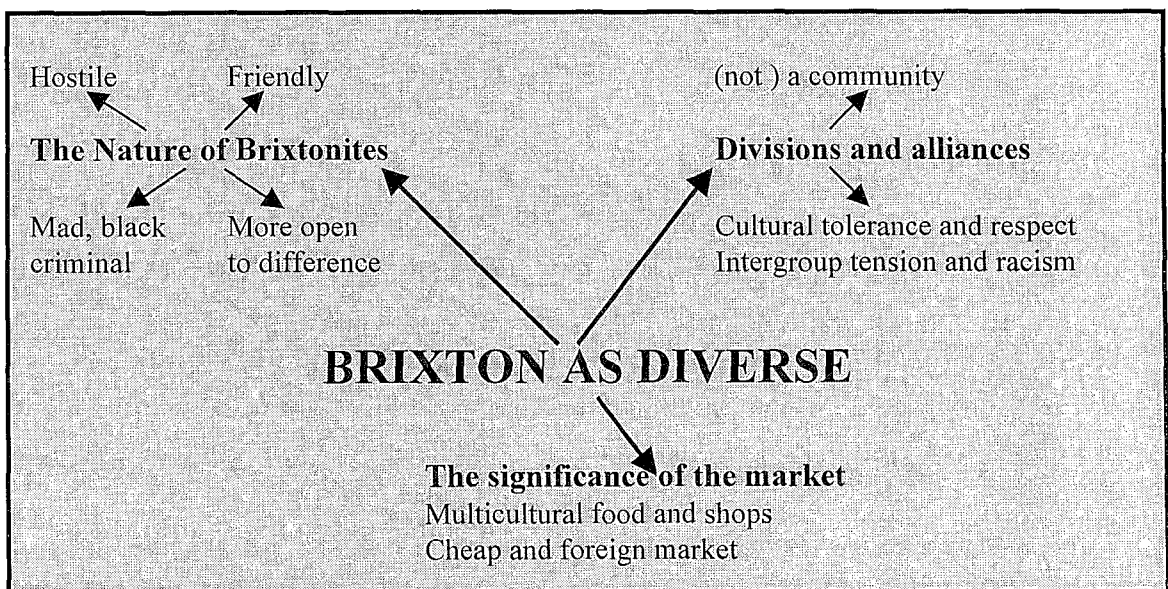
16:31 Arguing on bus

This is an extremely shocking scene: the girls argue fiercely, a man swears at them, the bus window is punched, the girls scream with rage at each other. Although a lot of this is almost unintelligible, it is clear that the girls are very agitated. The picture given is of five very angry black girls who have no respect for authority or for others, not even for their friends. What is not explained is that a white man punched one of the girls in the face (according to Sam, who is friends with one of the girls, follow-up discussion), or why it is that this incident is so upsetting for the girls. These stills demonstrate that the effect of this sequence is to confirm the social representation of Brixton as Bad, and present these girls as rough, threatening, black and deviant. The fact that we cannot understand much of what is said, or shouted, suggests an almost non-human and animalistic quality in the girls' behaviour. Black people, this implies, are uncivilised. One could argue that social representations are so colonised by the effortless superiority of white society (John, 1993).

The television camera does more than simply film an event like this; it does more than simply reveal a social reality. The camera represents the eye of the outside world looking on Brixton and making particular evaluations of those who live there. The children being filmed are obviously aware of this and, as SH1 put it, “act up to the camera”. In this way the television camera creates the reality of Brixton, as viewers perceive it. Incidents like this illustrate the symbolic significance of the ‘gaze’ of the other. For children in Brixton who often believe that this gaze criminalises them, such experiences are traumatic.

5.2. Challenging stereotypes: “Aim for the top”

The programme privileges the social representation Brixton is Bad. This is not to say that this is the only way that the programme can be understood. One would hope that the producers perceived more positive images in the programme. I can only guess at this as the main producer declined to be interviewed. In some ways the social representation Brixton as Diverse emerges from the film, in a way that challenges the image of Brixton as Bad. As well as showing that Brixton’s population is mixed, as illustrated above, the series as a whole can be seen to represent Brixton as a place of diverse characters, cultures, traditions and foods. In this way, the peripheral elements of this dominant representation are elaborated.



As we saw in the previous chapter, insiders draw on this representation of diversity to defend a version of a mixed population sharing cultures, showing tolerance for difference and caring for each other's welfare. There are several scenes in *'Stacey and the Buff Bay Crew'* that explore Stacey's mother's support of her daughter and the encouragement shown by staff at her school, for example, that portray Brixton as a caring and supportive community. In addition, there are a few scenes that hint at the cultural respect evident in Brixton. These stills illustrate these associations:



04:27 Stacey's mum cooking yams



17:45 Stacey's mum encourages Stacey to "Aim for the highest peak"



05:58 Saying goodbye to school friends:  
"Goodbye my white snow bunny!"; "Goodbye my black friend!"



10:15 Pastor and Stacey's niece at christening:  
praying for the young



21:31 Stacey's favourite teacher,  
giving her advice after  
failing her GCSE's.

05:13 One of Stacey's  
teachers:  
"Remember - we care"





Hence, it is possible to interpret this programme in different ways. To some it may support a version of Brixton as Diverse: as a vibrant and successful community, where cultural difference and cultural tolerance are celebrated. It may support a “multiplicity of race symbolisms” which permit “positive evaluations of black people to coexist alongside crude racist imagery” (Back, 1996, p.97). Contradictory images and meanings are far more common in everyday discourse than is often recognised by social scientists (Billig, 1988). The programme suggests many associations: Brixton is exotic, Brixton is poor, Brixton is black, Brixton is caring, Brixton is exciting, Brixton is dangerous. Some of these, predictably, are more obvious than others.

### 5.3. Representing a partial reality

The choice of *this* moment of an event as against that, of *this* person rather than that, of *this* angle rather than any other, indeed, the selection of this photographed incident to represent a whole complex chain of events and meaning, is a highly ideological procedure. (Hall, 1981, p. 241).

When I went back to the adolescents in Brixton for the follow-up discussions, after I had analysed this programme, most were very angry about the overall impression given of Brixton in *Electric Avenue*, as this extract illustrates:

Katrina: Stacey and the Buff Bay Crew. That was a bad programme.

Caroline: Why?

Pauline: Because it just said that Brixton is bad, bad, bad, and now people are even more going to think that Brixton is a bad place to go. They will not want to come to Brixton.

Danielle: People thought that Brixton was bad before, now they are going to think that it is worse. They just said all the bad things, and none of the good things.

One girl, a neighbour in my terminology, disagreed with such criticisms observing that “these things really happened! They didn’t just make them up!” (Sam). This is true. There is a reality to the depiction of Brixton and the girls in the programme. However, what other girls appreciated is that this is reality is both partial and constructed. For example, in a

follow-up discussion I asked whether they thought the programme was realistic, and this black African child said that:

Danielle: Yes, yes, definitely, it was realistic. But what they did was to twist everything. Just go from one bad story to the next, making like everything is bad. It didn't explain anything. Like at Thorpe Park –

It is not only researchers who “can indeed make a case that news visuals are ‘distorted’, especially when highly unrepresentative scenes are found to be put to work in the service of a particular news frame and/or social perspective on the event in question” as Hansen *et al* realise (1998, p. 196). Children as young as 12 are aware of how places and people with which and with whom they are familiar are misrepresented. In the words of SH1 “they ended up saying that this is what all black girls in Brixton are like, and that they will all end up failing school and getting pregnant”. What is surprising is that the producers did not foresee this response to the closing moments of the programme which were these:

Stacey gave up college when she discovered she was pregnant.

Stacey gave up college when she discovered she was pregnant.

She now has a baby boy, Savoun.

What were the producers' intentions when making this programme? Did they not realise the consequences of privileging such prejudiced interpretations? It would be much too simplistic to argue that these particular film-producers were bigoted, and that they designed this programme in full awareness of its negative stereotyping and with the explicit aim of reinforcing a racist ideology towards Brixton. As Ichhesier (1949) has argued, the ideology of racism is so pervasive that many of us are oblivious to the fact that we, too, are reproducing it. Hall (1997b) has discussed such “unconscious racism” in “the whole of ‘social problem’ television about race and immigration - often made, no doubt, by well-intentioned and liberal-minded broadcasters” (p. 162). I agree that “an ideological discourse does not depend on the conscious intentions of those who formulate statements within it” (*ibid*). Some children in the study are not quite so generous.

Some insiders feel that the media intentionally choose negative images of Brixton to make for dramatic television. SH2, for example, in relation to another documentary on adolescents in Brixton in the process of production, felt that the producers had deliberately chosen troublesome, excitable and exclusively black children who are unrepresentative of the school and the area. As she said, “normal, successful children make for boring television”. In the focus groups I ran many months before the airing of *Electric Avenue*, insiders claimed that the media exaggerate Brixton’s problems:

Mahua: Cos of all the bad things that are heard from the news, the media and everything. You know that, um, if the people in the news started to say good things about Brixton and everything, people might start, ‘oh, I’m going to Brixton’.

Aimee: They blow it up.

Caroline: But why do they blow it up?

Tara: They want to demote the area.

Caroline: Why do they want to demote the area?

Tara: I don’t know, they just see something about to happen and they just want to pull it down or some reason.

An effect of this programme, I hope I have illustrated, is to otherise and stigmatise Brixton.

I am not suggesting that this was consciously done. As Hall (1997b) has said:

What defines how the media function is the result of a set of complex, often contradictory, social relations; not the personal inclinations of its members. What is significant is not that they produce a racist ideology, from some single-minded and unified conception of the world, but that they are so powerfully constrained – ‘spoken by’ – a particular set of ideological discourses. (p. 168).

#### 5. 4. The wider picture

I believe that the programme *Stacey and the Buff Bay Crew* prefers a representation of Brixton as Bad over alternative associations. This is because it rests on a number of other dominant representations that invest blackness with associations with crime and deviance (Hall *et al*, 1978; Wetherell, 1996a). It is easy to see the parallels between images in *Electric Avenue* and “contemporary images of black youth – for example, the ‘mugger’, the ‘drug-baron’, the ‘yardie’, the gansta-rap singer, the ‘niggas with attitude’ bands and more

generally black urban youth ‘on the rampage’” (Hall, 1997b, p.251). To the outsider, aware of these images, the programme is anchored into these negative stereotypes (as reactions from university students outside of London demonstrated). In order to appreciate how the programme would be interpreted by the public at large we “have to understand how one message relates to the other sets of representations, images, and stereotypes that the audience is familiar with” (Morley, 1992, p.77). Most outsiders associate Brixton with “riots, drugs, clubs, and alternative types” (outsider living in Hampstead). Given this, this documentary is likely to objectify the representation that Brixton is essentially “bad, bad, bad” (Pauline).

Images, Ferguson (1998) advises “need to be understood and ‘placed’ in a contemporary context” (p. 79). In order to do this we shall briefly consider the wider context. We need to examine how Brixton is portrayed in the media more generally. There is a danger in discussing ‘the media’ of seeing television as “a homogeneous entity” and of overlooking the variation among programmes and genre (Aron, 1989). Media representations are obviously not uniform. My own review of Brixton in the media has included many different sources - television (the national and local News throughout the research period), radio (documentary on 1995 Brixton ‘riot’ on *Radio4*, December 1996), newspapers (broad sheet, tabloid and alternative papers throughout the research period), magazines (for example, March 24 – March 31 1999 issue of *TimeOut*, which included a guide to nightlife in Brixton) and online information (*brixton online* throughout the research period). There is obviously a great deal of variation in how each of these sites represents Brixton.

However, all these sources use these hegemonic social representations of Brixton - as Diverse and as Bad - to defend different perspectives on the area. There is a myriad of ways in which these representations are elaborated to support and defend different versions of Brixton. Even the most hegemonic of representations are contingent and never uniformly dominant (Moscovici, 1988). Organisations that locate themselves within the community assert and commend positive versions of Brixton. *Brixton online*, for example, describes Brixton as “a successful and increasingly self-confident multi-ethnic community”

(<http://www.brixton.co.uk>). This emphasis on the “nice side of Brixton” (Louise) is consciously set against negative images in the wider media. They are a reaction to how, in general, outsiders represent Brixton, as this quote from *brixton-online* illustrates:

Brixton is special. Despite the negative image often presented by the press and TV, a growing number of people are being drawn to the area - not just to visit the famous range of clubs, restaurants and entertainment venues, but also to settle and base their businesses here. Brixton is characterised by a proliferation of small businesses, alert to changing consumer trends and exploiting the area's proximity to the West End.

In this way even positive images confirm the fact that in the mainstream media Brixton is often stigmatised. Of course there are exceptions to this. After ‘the Brixton Bomb’ the media described Brixton as a “community united” against the violent threat of racism (*Newsroom SouthEast*, 24<sup>th</sup> April 1999). However, even in the climate of widespread outrage over the viciousness of this attack and sympathy towards those affected, social representations of foreignness and criminality crept in. For example, on 19<sup>th</sup> April 1999, two days after the Brixton bomb, the *Evening Standard* ran the headline “Thief walked off with brand new bomb holdall”. This was a story about how the bag that had contained the bomb was stolen.

Media representations of Brixton often otherise and stigmatise the place and its population, whether on television, in tabloids, in the quality press, or in magazines. Placed in the wider context, it is even more likely that the programme *Electric Avenue* will be interpreted by many outside of Brixton in ways that confirm negative stereotypes of the area. This is not to say that the programme is *directly* saying that Brixton is bad; rather, given the intertextuality of dominant discourses on Brixton and multiculturalism in general, this association is highly likely:

**Brixton = black = bad**

Recognising the fact that “Channel Four is highly regarded for its serious documentary and current affairs programming” (Ferguson, 1998, p.182), and that it is generally acknowledged to be better than BBC and ITV in its representation of black people (Tulloch, 1990), it is surprising that the producers of *Electric Avenue* were not more sensitive to

hegemonic representations of Brixton and not more careful in their choice of subjects, encounters, and images that may support prejudiced interpretations. In other contexts in the media, such as in sensational tabloid journalism and in the reporting of violence and disadvantage on the news, one would not be too surprised to find stereotypical and demonstrably racist images (Ryan, 1999). On a late night slot on Channel Four one might have expected something more challenging. This finding is testimony to the hegemony of these representations.

The media, in general, have enormous “power to represent someone or something in a certain way” (Hall, 1997a, p. 259). Representation, we have seen throughout this thesis, is central to the social construction of reality: it affects how people think about their social environment, how they interact with it, and how they understand themselves. If a place is stigmatised by the media, as in this case, the effects can be devastating for those who live there.

There is always “a dominant cultural order, though it is neither univocal or uncontested” (Hall, 1973, p.13). ‘Bad’ is not the only way to represent Brixton. Many children in the study challenged such a view, asserting an image of “successful, thriving, multi-ethnic, multicultural community” (SH1). New technologies (such as on-line communities) and community-based initiatives (art exhibitions, carnivals, business networks, for example) actively contest stigmatising representations. However, this prejudice operates within such powerful institutions that such a contest is difficult to win. The media, the police, the government, the national curriculum all have the position, the authority and the material and symbolic resources to maintain preferred readings. Through supporting hegemonic representations, however unconsciously, the media help construct and impoverish the social reality of Brixton.

## In conclusion

Because the representations I discuss stem from the material reality, there is bound to be overlap between these different representations. But representations are more than the

collectively constructed meanings that we give to the communities in which we live. Social representations also shape these worlds in influencing our identities, our understanding of others, and our everyday practice. Which particular social representations we use to make sense of a community is tied to where we stand in relation to this community, both literally and symbolically. Thus researching community involves researching both social representations of community and identities born within and against these representations.

In this chapter I have examined the role of the media in the social construction of Brixton and the reception of the media in Brixton. The social representation ‘Brixton as Bad’ emerged from adolescents’ views on the media portrayal of Brixton. A detailed examination of the significance of this representation brought the dialectic of representation/reality to the fore. This has allowed me to consider the extent to which representations reflect reality, and the extent to which they construct reality. The reality of Brixton is embedded in and informs the dominant social representations of the area: ‘Brixton as Bad’ and ‘Brixton as Diverse’.

Carey (1989) has asked, “How do groups in society struggle over the definition of what is real?” (p.31). Different groups in Brixton struggle over the definition of Brixton. In doing so they either confirm or reject the dominant social representations of Brixton. What I have discovered in this research is that we define, contest and assert what is real through the negotiation of social representations and hence through our co-construction of self-identity. Insiders, neighbours and outsiders all compete to define Brixton. As Jovchelovitch (1996) has found in her own research, “some groups have a greater chance than others to assert their version of reality” (p. 128). Behind the attempt to define what is real there is the existential attempt to establish one’s identity, interests and hopes. To establish a representation of the real is a process embedded in key social psychological phenomena such as identity construction and defence, cultural maintenance and inter-group relations. For insiders and neighbours in my study representing Brixton is a struggle for recognition and for self-definition. What is at stake in this competition is their self-esteem. It is to this that I now turn.

## CHAPTER 8

# The Struggle for Recognition and Esteem

### 1. Co-constructing Identity through Social Representations

- 1.1. Brixton in the media: Diverse and Bad
- 1.2. "Looking on" people in Brixton
- 1.3. Social representations in practice
- 1.4. Hegemonic representations of black people
- 1.5. Being black in Brixton

### 2. Seeing Oneself in the Eye of the Other

- 2.1. The oppression of difference
- 2.2. Passing: Denying association
- 2.3. Social representation as a self-fulfilling prophecy
- 2.4. "It's good to be bad"

### 3. Contesting Representations of the Other

- 3.1. Encouraging self-confidence
- 3.2. From parent to child
- 3.3. Teaching children self-awareness
- 3.4. Challenging stigma
- 3.5. Celebrating community

In this chapter I examine how stigma, identity and difference permeate everyday experiences in Brixton, and how children in the area cope with threats to identity. Both dominant social representations of Brixton, as Diverse and as Bad, overlap in stigmatising the area and those who live there. An examination of everyday practices in Brixton highlights the intersubjectivity of identity construction and re-presentation. Focusing on the different strategies that different children adopt in dealing with stigma reveals the salience of hegemonic representations of black people in the social construction of Brixton. Drawing on central social psychological theories of stigma (Goffman, 1968; Breakwell, 1986), I emphasise that strategies for coping with stigma and for asserting self-esteem must be understood in their social context (Crocker and Quinn, 1998). Transforming stigmatising social representations, constructing positive representations of community and establishing community pride can only be achieved intersubjectively, through both the challenge and the support of others.



## 1. Co-constructing Identity through Social Representations

Seeing your own community re-presented in wider discourses leads to a heightened sense of awareness of how others see you and therefore increased self-reflexivity. The self “is a project that the individual constructs out of the symbolic materials which are available to him or her, materials which the individual weaves into a coherent account of who he or she is, a narrative of self-identity” (Thompson, 1995, p. 210). When these symbolic materials (a) concern you and (b) are “demeaning” (Tara), the intersubjectivity of self and hence self-identity are threatened (Breakwell, 1986). “Awareness that one’s social identity is devalued in the eyes of others poses a threat to both personal and collective self-esteem” (Crocker and Quinn, 1998, p. 517). If a child is to reject this stigma, she must first acknowledge it. The struggle over representations has high costs and high rewards. Failure can lead to anti-social behaviour and self-hate (Allport, 1954), while the rewards are self-awareness, a respect for others, and self-esteem (Honneth, 1995).

Identity and self, we have established, are co-constructed through the dialectic of self-other relations. A child has to take on the social representations of its communities and learn to see itself as others do. The child has to step outside of itself and “go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself” (Hall, 1991a, p.21). The effects of this turning back on oneself are very different for particular social groups. For those marginalised, and those stigmatised, questions of identity are painfully inescapable. This Nigerian girl explains:

Caroline: So is being from Brixton important or not?

Danielle: Yeah, it is actually. Cos when you say ‘I’m from Brixton’, and then they all start saying ‘Is it?’ ‘Gosh, she’s from Brixton!’ ‘She’s got a knife, she is carrying a gun, she got drugs, she got everything!’

Insiders and neighbours manipulate the same social representations in constructing and defending their identities as being-from or as not-being-from Brixton. Neighbours, for example, elaborate on the representations Brixton as Diverse and Brixton as Bad in ways that denigrate the area and so to distance themselves from Brixton. In this way, they offer *perceptions* of the area as they position themselves at a distance from Brixton,

as *observers* of the area. Insiders, by contrast, *explain* their experiences of, and within, Brixton as they locate themselves as *actors* in, and experts of, the community.

What is missing from the account thus far is a detailed study of the meeting of these two perspectives. Chapters Six and Seven demonstrated that insiders are well aware of outsiders' social representations of Brixton, and develop ways to contest and reject stigma. But what exactly is the effect of recognising the perspective of others? When one sees oneself and one's community in the eye of the other, and feels the injustice of prejudice, how does one respond? What, simply, are the consequences of stigmatising social representations?

Such social representations obviously affect how outsiders view Brixton, how they feel about going to the area, and how they treat people living there. These representations can also stigmatise people from Brixton, impacting on their self-awareness and both challenging and developing self-confidence. Through oppositional representations of the area, as a multicultural and tolerant community, for example, insiders develop a community identity that they are proud of. Challenging the hegemonic representations of others, however, is no easy task. It requires recognising prejudice, appreciating tolerance and developing a dependable social support network.

### 1.1. Brixton in the media: Diverse and Bad

The media play a central role in confirming or contesting denigrating representations of Brixton, as we saw in Chapter Seven. In acknowledging these representations, in developing them, and in challenging them, people who live in Brixton establish a relationship with others who live in the same area. In this way, the media can inform, develop and disrupt community identities. This is especially true for so-called 'minorities' within a culture who may not accept the media portrayals of themselves and their communities (Imtiaz, forthcoming). Take this example:

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'.

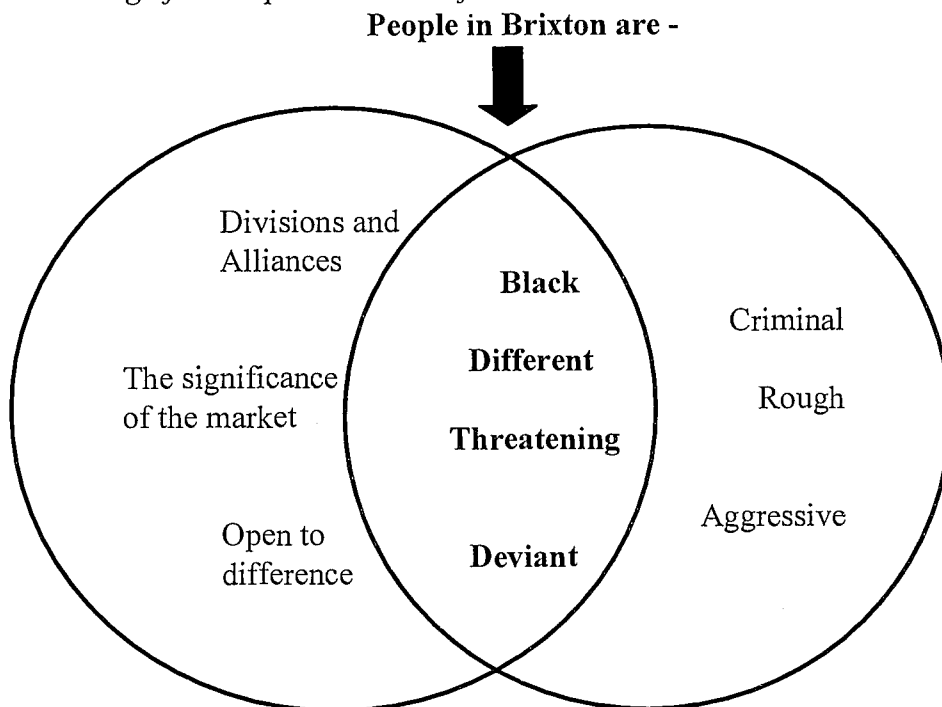
Caroline: So what does this stamp say?

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

This extract shows that “individuals with a stigma quickly become aware of the way that others view them” (Becker and Arnold, 1986, p. 48). These girls realise that they are constructed as ‘other’ by the outside world through the news and other television programmes about Brixton. When discussing the stigmatising effect of media representations, children often spoke with anger, indignation and shame. These are common psychological responses to the realisation that “one is being illegitimately denied social recognition” (Honneth, 1995, p. 136).

The children in the study are well aware that elements of the media support and confirm the social representation ‘Brixton as Bad’ which constructs Brixton and its inhabitants as black, different, deviant and threatening. The social representation ‘Brixton as Diverse’ also includes contested images of people who live in Brixton. As we saw in Chapter Six, within this representation people who live in Brixton are seen to be different, black, threatening and deviant. Insiders, who seek to locate themselves within the community and establish a sense of worth in doing so, contest such stigma, and portray themselves as friendly, caring and, above all, open to difference. Thus, the two dominant representations of Brixton both operate in ways that portray the character of Brixtonites, although these images are highly contested. The diagram below illustrates how the two representations overlap in both confirming and opposing the images of people who live in Brixton.

*The meeting of two representational fields: Brixton as Diverse and Brixton as Bad.*



As Chapter Seven demonstrated, the media draw on both of these representations to different degrees. The representation ‘Brixton as Bad’ may, at times, be *preferred* as it is easily anchored in wider racist discourses which connect blackness and badness (Jahoda, 1999). Unsurprisingly, this can have a damaging effect on the self-identities of those re-presented in this way. Research on this kind of stigma predicts that “disrespect typically brings with it a loss of self-respect” (Honneth, 1995, p. 134). Other studies on stereotypes and identity have also found that negative representations of one’s membership group can lead to low self-esteem (Branscombe *et al.*, 1999). Burgess (1978), for example, in a study of insiders’ and outsiders’ descriptions of Hull, argued that a perceived “decline in self-esteem may be a reaction to an increasing number of ‘biased’ media reports” about Hull (p. 84).

Images and narratives about Brixton presented in the media affect how insiders see themselves. This is because “the individual learns their social worth through interaction in the context of dominant ideologies” (Breakwell, 1986, p. 98). The media are an important symbolic resource in the development and maintenance of both self-identity (Thompson, 1995) and community identities (Gillespie, 1995). People who live in the general area of Brixton may manage collectively to reject stigmatising media representations and assert a more affirming version of Brixton. Alternatively they may use social representations to denigrate Brixton and their relationship to it. Whichever the case, their identities are born in a struggle against stigma.

### 1.2. “Looking on” people in Brixton

People who live in the general area of Brixton are made self-conscious of their tie to Brixton through the gaze of the other in mixed contacts. As these older Chinese girls explain, this tie changes how people recognise or “look on you”:

Weona: I think everyone is going to have the same mentality about Brixton, about, you know, it is a rough place. I mean there was that thing in America, whatever, the brochures about London. They said 'avoid Peckham and avoid Brixton'. And I don't think that is fair at all.

Caroline: I didn't hear about that.

Weona: Oh, that was ages ago. It was like all of Brixton is a really rough area, and Peckham as well. 'You are going to get murdered', or whatever, 'the crime rate there is sky high'.

Caroline: And how does that make you feel, like, living in Brixton?

Cheng: Like, maybe if you tell somebody you live in Brixton they will maybe look down on you. Like make you feel bad, like what are you doing here? Like coming from a place like Brixton.

Caroline: Do you think that that would ever create a problem for you?

Lily: No, not for me.

Ien: It depends. ... Some people have this image, the stereotypical image, and if you tell them that Brixton is where you are from, they are going to get instantly into their head that image. They've got already a bad image about you even though they don't know you or, um, got to know you yet. So they just think 'oh, because you live there, you're going to be this type of person'.

In this way representations of Brixton colour the way people who live in the area are "looked on" by others. The power of the gaze of the other became apparent early on, in my Master's study of the 1995 Brixton 'riot' (see Appendix III). Here three young black boys acted out what it is to be "looked on". These are my notes from this focus group:

I asked them to explain what it meant to say "look on you". The three boys act this out for me. Two of them act out walking down the street. The third, as a "white lady", walks towards them and hesitates, unsure of where to hold her handbag as the two boys will probably walk on either side of her. What this showed is that slight movements and hesitations like this can reveal the deep-seated fears and prejudices of others. What the boys were trying to explain to me, I think, is how subtle racism can be, and yet how devastating it is to your self-image when a victim of it.

This experience is not restricted to Brixton. Representations of young black men as violent, criminal and overtly sexual are well-documented (Hall, 1997b). The young black men in Back's (1996) study, for example, "refer to instances in South London where white people with whom they have come into contact 'hold onto their bags tightly' or 'put their heads down and walk away'" (p. 164). The boys in my study

suggest, however, that the label 'Brixton' intensifies the prejudice people already exhibit towards black men, as these 13 and 14 year old boys explain:

Caroline: So, do you think that black people who come from Brixton - is it worse than being black from Croydon or -

Many: Yeah, yeah, it is.

Cliff: Yeah, cos you born in Brixton.

Connor: Yeah, cos you born in Brixton and you can't even get a job in Brixton!

Dean: Say if you was to go somewhere, say me, I like playing football, if I was going to go somewhere ask the team if I could play for them, they heard where I came from, they might like not kinda like me to play for that team.

As Dean's example shows, the struggle for recognition and the challenge of developing self-confidence and self-esteem permeate the practices of the everyday. Travelling to school, going shopping, leaving Brixton on an excursion, and seeing Brixton in the News, for example, are all marked by the friction between conflicting representations of Brixton. As such, these mundane practices may throw up deeply unsettling questions of self-identity and self-worth. In relation to representations in the media, Thompson (1995) has recommended that:

To understand the ideological character of media messages, one must consider the ways in which these messages are incorporated into the lives of recipients, how they become part of their products of self-formation and how they are used by them in the practical contexts of their day-to-day lives (p. 214).

To understand the ideological character of social representations, similarly, one has to examine how these representations filter into, and so construct, everyday practices, how they are collectively used to develop and defend self-identity, and so how they form the basis of self-knowledge, self-confidence and self-respect.

### 1.3. Social representations in practice

Social representations, I have shown, are used to co-construct, develop and defend one's identity, interests and hopes. "Constructing an identity is rarely accomplished without a struggle" (Ryan, 1999, p.20). Different children exploit different strategies in the struggle to be recognised as they see themselves. It is worth restating these. On the whole, insiders re-present Brixton in ways which provide them with the positive identity

of members of a tolerant and multicultural community. Neighbours, in general, represent Brixton in ways that demonstrate their difference from, and superiority to, Brixton. Underlying both strategies, however, there is a disturbing tension. The way others re-present people from Brixton clashes with the way Brixtonites describe themselves. Even as young as 12, insiders are painfully aware of this. These two older black and dual-heritage girls convey this:

Tara: It's demeaning. I think it's really demeaning.

Others: Yeah, yeah.

Caroline: Why?

Tara: It just lowers them, right? Like you're from Brixton, why would you think this because of my area? Why must you put a label on me?

Riva: You got to prove it. You've got to prove that you are better. And that you can do it more than any other person.

The divergence in perspective between how others see Brixtonites and how Brixtonites see themselves enters the lives of these children on a daily basis. "Any thought, feeling, action or experience which challenges the individual's personal or social identity is a threat" (Breakwell, 1983, p.13). For those living in a stigmatised area, such threats are part of the fabric of everyday life. Buying a Mars bar, walking down the road, meeting a police officer, all contain the potential hazard of meeting stigma in the eye of the other.

In "mixed contacts" insiders encounter outsiders' representations of them (Goffman, 1968, p. 23). On the whole, insiders feel that, while there may be racism in Brixton, it is generally attributable to non-Brixtonites, mainly the police, outside gangs and shopkeepers<sup>1</sup>. Insiders believe that these groups have negative representations of Brixton that, for the most part, are prejudiced. There is a widely shared representation of the police as incompetent and racist, as other studies have also found (e.g. Gilroy, 1987). As these black girls agree:

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<sup>1</sup> Shopkeepers were generally perceived to be from outside Brixton. This is because they are seen to exploit people who live in Brixton, and then take their profits out of the area to wherever they live. This causes much resentment. In the 1995 'riot' this image led to many small shops being targeted (Howarth, 1996).

Vicky: Brixton police just like beat up people's kids and harass people's kids in Brixton.

Jayna: I don't appreciate Brixton police. All they do is walk up and down the street, not being racist or anything, they go for the black kids, the boys especially. And stop them. Stop them, yeah, and bang them in the police cells and then beat them up and tell people how they had heart attack and all that! (*The others laugh at this reference to the death of Wayne Douglas in police custody, see Appendix III.*)

Those in my study felt that racist treatment of black people by the police was endemic in Britain (as the Stephen Lawrence case has brought to light). However, again, they stressed that this happens "especially in Brixton" (Neena). The older boys explain:

Caroline: Do you think that you might get stopped more in Brixton than say, in the West End?

Paul: Wouldn't happen in Stockwell, yeah!

Theo: Yeah, yeah, I have never got stopped in another area. In Brixton they just pick on the little children.

Police-community relations have had a turbulent history in Brixton, inscribed in public memory by three 'riots' (1981, 1983 and 1995). Social representations of Brixton held in wider society and by the police often conflict with the representations that Brixtonites have of themselves. When the identity of a community is challenged by a powerful external body, distrust, anger and, in the extreme, violence can be the result. My study of the most recent 'riot' illustrates this (Howarth, 1996).

The children describe the same divergence in perspective when telling stories about gang violence. Insiders believe, for example, that The Triads (a London-Chinese gang) have an image of people from Brixton as aggressive and violent and so come to the area "looking for trouble" (Tara). This shows how social representations have the power actually to create social reality. Episodes of violence, involving both gangs and the police, confirm and extend Brixton's reputation as deviant and dangerous, as this 13 year old black British boy explains, referring to outside gangs:

Cliff: They always come to Brixton, and the party starts, and then they go away, to their area, and people don't know where they are from. And they say that it is Brixton, cos they think that it is people from Brixton fighting each other, and it's not. They are coming from other areas, and fighting and going away and then we get the bad name, you know, so.



Children also experience suspicion and disrespect when shopping. According to the Chinese girls this affects all children, regardless of gender, heritage or skin-colour. However, the black boys in the study maintained that this is particularly common for them as “just because you are black you are being targeted all the time” (Cliff). Cliff continues:

Cliff: Say one of us was to walk into the shop, only black, they go like ‘one at a time!’, ‘One at a time’, yeah, and they will stand there and watch you. You don’t, you feel like you done something wrong, cos they are standing there and looking at you, and you are trying to buy something.

Connor: I tell you what gets on my nerves, yeah, when they let white people, or Indian people, yeah, they let them in there loads, then the black person -

Malcolm: He says ‘Two at a time!’

Connor: Wait outside, yeah, ‘Two at a time’ to the black people, like they are going to steal something.

Both children and teachers maintained that prejudice intensifies in mixed contacts outside of Brixton. SH3 explained that for many children work-experience can be particularly “distressing” as, for some, it is the first time they encounter the full extent of prejudice towards people from Brixton. Again, it is young black boys who bear the brunt of this.

SH1: I think they (students at her school) are disadvantaged in the sense that when they go out into the world and they are trying to get jobs, there is, um, I like the term institutional racism. ... I’m talking about what would be termed good sort of employment in the city and places like that. They are trying to be very kind to people they see as being black. But they employ virtually nobody, or they only employ people on a sort of catering level, and are wary when a large black lad, who is probably smashing, comes across their threshold, you know, and are amazed that they are very human, polite, and looks nice, and you know, has done all the right things. I think our kids meet that a lot when they go out of this environment.

As this extract shows, many of the stigmatising social representations about Brixton rest on broader racist discourses about black people. Hegemonic representations of black people, therefore, have a powerful effect on both the construction and the interpretation of everyday experiences in Brixton.

#### 1.4. Hegemonic representations of black people

Both representations of Brixton, as Diverse and as Bad, rest on deeply rooted ideological discourses that link black people, exotic strangers, savages and animals (Ferguson, 1998). 'Diversity', we saw in Chapter Six, can be interpreted to mean the foreign and the exotic. 'Bad', Chapter Seven illustrated, embodies the age-old dichotomy between white and black, good and evil, culture and nature (Levi-Strauss, 1968).

For the most part, racist representations of black people remained implicit in focus group discussion. In groups where the relationships between participants was ambiguous and possibly tense, children were more cautious in broaching such a potentially upsetting and controversial issue. When in the secure setting of a focus group made up of close friends it seemed that children found it easier to discuss their experiences of racism. Here is an example: these 12 and 13 year old black and dual-heritage girls indignantly explain that:

Pauline: You know where all the crowds are in Brixton? Right, that's where they are going to build a hotel for the tourists that are coming from all over the world to see Brixton, and that's even going to cause even more troubles.

Katrina: People won't like that.

Caroline: Why not?

Pauline: It's like they are in a zoo and people are just there watching them -

Danielle: - their behaviour like they are zoo animals or mad.

Caroline: So is that true? Are they building a hotel?

Louise: Yeah, because that's what people think of us, they think of us as animals, and we're not animals.

Caroline: Right. Who thinks of you as animals?

Louise: That's what some people say.

Katrina: Some people say 'you nig nogs', why don't you go back on your banana boat, back to where you came from and everything.

Louise: And they call us animals.

Sam: And they call us black niggers.

These children probably do not know that there was a time when black people *were* exhibited in museums, zoos and places of entertainment. Even as recently as 1997, a stuffed Bechuana tribesman was displayed in the museum of the Catalan town of Banyoles (Jahoda, 1999). White people's fascination with black people, their fear of difference and the horrifying extent of their racism, have been passed down through the ages and threaten the self-identities of black youth today. Contemporary representations of black people are embedded in a prehistory of images of monstrous races, wild men, animality and savagery, as Jahoda's recent *Images of Savages* describes in meticulous detail. Animality, Jahoda (1999) argues, is the "key image" in the denigration of black people over the centuries and "the one that has survived most stubbornly" (p. 244). As the extract above illustrates, "the powerful symbolic links between apes and blacks, which have been shown to go back centuries, are likely to have endured in the popular mind – indeed, their effects still remain discernible" (*ibid*, p. 48).

While this kind of racism is all too familiar, seeing young teenagers articulating these experiences is profoundly shocking. Extracts such as this, which lose much of their impact in transcription, reveal the enormous task that faces these children: to acknowledge and contest the weight of the history of racism in constructing a positive sense of self. We cannot escape our history, though it is not of our making. As Marx has eloquently stated, "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living".

A depressingly large number of studies have uncovered the same link between black, bad, deviant, subhuman and animal (Hall, 1997a). For example, in Back's study in two distinct neighbourhoods in South London, there are many examples of racist jokes and 'wind-ups' that "bear the hallmark of the heavy ideological load that constructs people of African descent as 'primitive animals'" (Back, 1996, p. 88). The particular experiences of racism in these locales rests on the universality of these representations that stretches across centuries and continents.

These studies inform my own work. Representations of black people are more akin to the collective representations described by Durkheim (1898), in that they occur as social

facts. They are facts in that they construct “meaningful reality” (Operario and Fiske, 1998, p. 39). They are facts because they have to be acknowledged before they can be challenged. Because Brixton is re-presented as black these hegemonic representations inform the way Brixton is socially constructed. In order to begin to understand representations of Brixton, therefore, one must recognise that much of the symbolism and prejudice invested in these images of Brixton is drawn from powerful racist ideologies.

### 1.5. Being black in Brixton

While black people are not the largest group in Brixton, the representation of Brixton as black is very pervasive. From those in my study, black children were more likely to identify with Brixton than children with other skin-colours. One reason black children identify with Brixton is that 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). This ‘short-cut’ makes it difficult for black children to conceal their association with the area.

Black children, especially black girls, tend to emphasise the benefits of living in Brixton over the difficulties. They, more so than children of other skin-colours, need to defend themselves against “the socially sanctioned value judgements” that link aggression, criminality, animality, blackness and Brixton (Tajfel, 1969). These representations, we have already seen, centre more on young black men than on black women or non-black men. Hence, it can come as no surprise to learn that it is the black boys in this study who have the most difficulty in rejecting such stigma and asserting a positive sense of self.

Black identities intersect with gender, age, social class, ethnicity and locality (Tizard and Phoenix, 1989). The content of social representations of Brixton concerns young black men more than others. For some living in the area of Brixton this is a double-

burden, a double dose of stigma. They are already “discredited” as black; they are potentially “discreditable” as Brixtonites (Goffman, 1968, p. 14). Some black children attempt to protect themselves against the stigma of being-from-Brixton by distancing themselves from Brixton. One of the strategies for coping with threatened identities, noted by Breakwell, is to refocus attention upon another element of identity, insisting they are from another nearby area or even another country. The potentially destructive characteristics, in this case representations of Brixton, are “no longer allowed to occupy the centre of the identity stage”, Breakwell (1986) has theorised; “another quality is brought to the fore instead, invested with greater value, and self-esteem is maintained through this circuitous route” (p. 101).

In stark contrast, other black children use representations of Brixton as a resource with which to construct alternative, more self-affirming representations that bolster a positive community 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, encourages awareness of black history and culture (SH1). By identifying with an area known for its resistance to oppression, black children develop the self-awareness and the self-confidence to oppose racist images of black people. The representation of Brixton as Diverse can be manipulated to promote Brixton as a community aware and proud of its differences, as I elaborated in Chapter Six. Here, as in Back’s study of a nearby area in South London, “the assertion of blackness results in a re-imagination of the black self, free from the stigmatised definitions formulated according to the logic of racism” (Back, 1996, p. 143).

While it is black children in particular who cannot avoid the stigma in the gaze of the other, I would argue that all those who live in Brixton feel the effects of racism, regardless of their skin-colour. This is because representations of “the black community” (Sam) merge with representations of Brixton. It is important not to be seduced by this discourse myself. Brixton is, I have demonstrated, a multicultural area with a broad mix of different ethnicities and cultures. It is not, I would strongly argue, *only* a black area. This thesis is not *only* about black people. It is about children and

adults from a wealth of different cultural backgrounds confronting social representations about them and the area in which they live. Both black and non-black children collectively construct community identities that simultaneously contest and affirm hegemonic representations of black people. What this emphasises is that the experiences of stigma must be understood in their broad historical and cultural contexts (Becker and Arnold, 1986, p. 55). What we need to explore further is how adolescents make sense of these stigmatising social representations.

## 2. Seeing Oneself in the Eye of the Other

The extracts given above demonstrate that the stigmatising representations of others permeate the lives of those who live in Brixton. Consciousness of self emerges, as Mead (1934) has theorised, from “taking on the perspective of others”. In order to develop a unique identity within society, I argued in Chapter Four, the individual has to see himself through the eyes of others. He becomes particularly “self-conscious and calculating about the impression he is making” in mixed contacts (Goffman, 1968, p. 25). Children in Brixton may see a reflection of an aggressive, deviant and potentially criminal stranger in the eye of the other. For some, the daily reminders that this is how ‘the generalised other’ perceives them, are too much to resist: they come to recognise the stranger as themselves. The social representation becomes the reality.

“All groups”, Breakwell (1983) argues, “are targets for ascribed identities: images of themselves pinned upon them by others” (p. 191). When one takes on others’ representations of one’s group in co-constructing self-identity, one’s identity is ‘ascribed’; that is, it is “tacked upon a group from outside” (*ibid*). There is evidence in my own data that some children in Brixton do just this: accept others’ representations of themselves in forming a sense of self.

By elaborating Mead’s I-me dialectic it is possible to conceptualise how stigma infiltrates the generalised other and so penetrates the construction of self. Just as there may be key players in a game who have the authority and prestige to assert and alter the rules of the game, there are key players in all arenas of life who have more influence in the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). It is their voices,

therefore, that dominate the generalised other. Particular ‘others’ have more access to, and control over, the social construction of particular ‘other’ identities, especially through the command of the media. The coloniser, for example, has the power, the resources and the authority to represent and so construct the colonised, as other and as inferior. In this way, people may become the objects of particular social representations and stereotypes that are beyond their reach. They are, that is, stigmatised (Goffman, 1968).

Some have the representational resources to either criticise or reject such stigma. They have the support and strength to claim and develop a more affirming version of a vibrant, united and culturally tolerant community. Other children, sadly, neighbours, as I have called them, struggle to assert an alternative version of Brixton and, so, of themselves. The result can be depression, ambivalent self-identity and poor personal and collective self-esteem (Crocker and Quinn, 1998). Because self-image is “dependent on the possibility of being continually backed up by others,” Honneth (1995) maintains, “the experience of being disrespected carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse” (p.132).

### 2.1. The oppression of difference

You are not a black man, Fanon (1952) vividly described, until someone looks at you as a black man. You are not a woman, an adult, or from-Brixton, until others see you in these ways. Hence, it is the racist, the sexist, and the prejudiced who evoke the inferior. It is the nonmarginalised who evoke the marginalised. “The Jew is the one whom other men consider a Jew: that is the simple truth from which we must start. ... It is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew” (Sartre, 1948a, p.69, italics in original). That is, you are not different until you realise that an other perceives you as different.

We know from many social psychologists that the recognition of difference is essential to the emergence of a distinct identity (e.g. Mead, 1967; Piaget, 1968; Winnicott, 1971). Such recognition, however, can be so debilitating that it endangers the possibility of challenging the perceptions of others, and so mutilates the reciprocal dynamics of the self.

Fanon's (1952) *Black Skin, White Masks* is a deeply penetrating, unsettling account of the devastating effects of difference. Drawing directly on Hegel's doctrine of recognition, Fanon unpacks the generalised other, and uncovers the relations of domination and subordination at play. Consider this:

'Dirty nigger!' Or simply, 'Look, a Negro!'

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. [...] On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my body with black blood? But I did not want this revision, this thematisation. All I wanted was to be a man among other men. (Fanon, 1952, p. 109; 112).

What Fanon is describing is the all-powerful gaze of the dominant other. It is through the eyes of the other that we find ourselves. "That is why", Hall has explained, "it is a question, not only of 'black-skin' but of '*Black-Skin, White Masks*' – the internalisation of the self-as-other" (Hall, 1988a). When this other has the means and the authority to define who we are, and has no cause to heed our protesting voices, we may become crippled by feelings of dependence, social shame, and inadequacy. The significance of this can be devastating, as the label and meaning of stigma penetrate identity (Goffman, 1968). The gaze of the other can tear the narrative of self, causing deep shame and "crippling" self-identity (Giddens, 1991, p. 45). There is psychological, as well as physical, violence to racism (Wetherell, 1996a). Erikson (1964) has claimed that "there is ample evidence of inferiority feelings and of morbid self-hate in all minority groups" (p. 155). Theo, a Nigerian boy who lives in Brixton but rejects any association with it, explains that the community suffers from a lack of self-esteem:

Theo: One of the reasons they (Brixtonites) don't work as a community is they hate themselves so, that's why. Hate yourself.

Caroline: What do you mean?

Theo: Like you don't like your colour, you know.

Of all those who distance themselves from Brixton, Theo is the most vocal in his attack on Brixton. In the study, he was in a focus group with his friends, all neighbours and all disparaging of Brixton and people who live there. Living the most centrally in Brixton, he



had the most to lose in being recognised as from-Brixton. Adopting stigmatising representations of Brixton is a way of building defensive barriers against the threat of these representations. This is a risky strategy, as, at any moment, his deception may be uncovered. His identity, Goffman (1968) would say, is spoiled. This behaviour is, tragically, not unusual. It illustrates a wider pattern which Back (1996) has described as “an identity crisis among the British-born black community” (p. 151).

## 2.2. Passing: Denying association

The black feminist bell hooks has powerfully described how difficult this process of taking on the perspective of the other can be. “The pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves ... is so intense that it rends us. It rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identity” (hooks, 1992, p.4). The voice and the representations of the other may be so destructive for some that they may attempt to deny or remove traces of their group membership. They attempt to “pass” without discrediting information being noticed (Goffman, 1968).

As I have detailed in Chapter Four, children in Brixton may do this by disassociating themselves from Brixton, by emphasising a different comparison group, and, most significantly, by re-evaluating social representations of Brixton. For instance, when I asked a school-head to help me arrange focus groups with children from Brixton, she said that this may be difficult as some children who in her view were ‘from Brixton’ would deny this or be “ashamed” of this connection (SH3).

“Children from ethnic minority groups”, Breakwell (1986) has observed, “between the ages of four and ten, at various historical times have been found to deny that they belong to their own racial group” (p. 83). An example from Erikson (1964) is sadly familiar: a four-year-old black child would stand in front of a mirror and scrub her skin with soap, trying to get rid of her blackness. I was reminded of this while shopping in Brixton. These are my participant-observation notes from that incident:

Friday, 5 June 1998; In Boots in Brixton.

I was buying some moisturiser, and a black woman next to me started talking to me. She complained that the price of 'Fade out' (a skin-lightening product) kept going up. I smiled and nodded. At the checkout I was again next to her. She complained again to the checkout girl. The manager was called, who reduced the price. As the checkout girl was ringing up the price, she said to the woman 'You shouldn't use this, you know?' The customer said 'Yes, I know, but I don't very often'. And left. Then the checkout girl (who looked dual-heritage, and whose skin was a dark brown colour) said to me that she thought people shouldn't buy these products, and that they gave you skin-cancer. I agreed and said that I could not understand why people would use them. The checkout girl said, 'Some people, some black people, don't realise that black can be beautiful'. She said that her colleague at the till (who had very black skin) was beautiful and that she liked the colour of her skin. I agreed. We carried the conversation on after she had served me, so that other customers were waiting for us to finish. "People don't know how to be proud," she said.

As far as I am aware, there is no one in my study who has black heritage in their family but denied it. Rather, as I have illustrated, there are some adolescents who avoid a *discreditable* identity by separating themselves from Brixton. In Chapter Six I illustrated how neighbours supported a disparaging version of Brixton as a divided and violent black community, characterised by frightening and aggressive criminals, 'weirdos' and foreigners. In so manipulating the representation of diversity, neighbours distance themselves both from Brixton and from the threat of stigmatising representations. In addition, neighbours adopt the representation of Brixton as Bad to further emphasise their antipathy for the area, as I detailed in Chapter Seven. By insisting on a negative version of Brixton, they symbolically remove themselves from the area and so from the possibility of being seen as someone from Brixton. As Goffman (1968) realised, passing has "a great psychological price, a very high level of anxiety, in living a life that can be collapsed at any moment" (p. 109). This strategy requires constant vigilance; it is essential to prevent others from discovering that they are from Brixton.

"Because of the great rewards in being considered normal, almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on occasion by intent" (Goffman, 1968, p. 95). Even those who defend positive versions of Brixton, admit that there are times when, because of outsiders' prejudices, they conceal their association with Brixton. Both girls and boys who identify with Brixton gave remarkably similar stories of how and why they would do this in a job interview. For example, these 13 and 14 old year black girls describe:

Jayna: I wouldn't want to say that I was from Brixton, if I was going to a really important job interview, cos when they see Brixton they don't see normal like, they see guns, drugs and everything. If they are not from Brixton themselves, if they are from a far away place, like I might want to work for a big company up the city somewhere, and they say I'm from Brixton, they will think 'No, I don't want to hire her, she's from Brixton. She might have all them negativity things and that'.

Mollie: Drugs, doing drugs in the workplace, selling weed in the workplace.

Jayna: I would never tell no one. I do, yeah, I come from Brixton, there is nothing I can do about it, but if I was going to a job interview, somewhere really, really far, I would tell, I would have to tell a little lie. Say I was from somewhere different.

For these children it is better to lie than to have to live with the consequences of being-from-Brixton. They know intimately just how crushing it can be to be only viewed in terms of their category membership. Whatever their unique individual attributes, strengths and weaknesses, ambitions and fears, they are engulfed by the other: they will not be recognised as they see themselves.

### 2.3. Social re-presentation as a self-fulfilling prophecy

For subordinate groups in society, assuming the perspective of the other necessitates acknowledging negative representations of their own communities and identities. Anger and depression are common responses to prejudice and threats to identity (Branscombe *et al*, 1999). As angry and aggressive behaviour are part of the stigma of being-from-Brixton, it is difficult for children from the area not to conform to prejudiced expectations.

The insider boys elaborate on this in detail, and give examples of how stigmatising representations actually produce the reality they symbolise. They can operate, that is, as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Allport, 1954). Carl, for instance, describes how aggressive behaviour is "expected", and how such expectations upset and anger people from Brixton. This results in Brixtonites being, as well as appearing to be, aggressive. Impressions of the observer, in this way, inform and so become the expressions of the actor (Ichheiser, 1949). In the final moments of his focus group this young black British boy explains:

Malcolm: The thing I don't understand is: I'm near my house, yeah? I'm hanging around, then I see a policeman, yeah? I act like I'm doing, doing something, so I sit down and pretend like I waiting, something like that. But I shouldn't do that cos I don't want to act like that.

Sartre (1948) has described this consequence of stigma in relation to Jews: “They have allowed themselves to be poisoned by the stereotype that others have of them, and they live in fear that their acts will correspond to this stereotype” (p. 95).

What is both fascinating and disturbing about these stories is that the children clearly understand the dialectics of identity and the effect of the generalised other on self-consciousness. Tragically, a few adolescents “buy into” stigmatising representations of themselves (Crocker and Quinn, 1998, p. 541). They take the dominant representations of Brixton and they apply them to themselves. In this way they devalue their association with Brixton, and so, too, devalue their own identities (Breakwell, 1986).

Murrell (1998), in a study of racism in an American context, has found that in some black groups “there is a high degree of internalisation of negative racial stereotypes” (p.190). These individuals “will endorse conceptions of blacks as mentally defective, physically gifted, emotional and highly sexual” (*ibid*). Unsurprisingly, Murrell found that this process of internalisation corresponded with low self-esteem. Not all members of an audience have the symbolic resources to oppose disparaging representations of their claimed community and develop a more affirming representation of self. Why it is that some children are able to confront and contest stigma and other children adopt and develop stigmatising representations of themselves is a complex issue. I return to this point below.

It is highly distressing to see a child recognise the stigma that others give to him and struggle to reject it. Again, the power and emotion of the voices of these young people is lost in transcription. Here, however, is Cliff, a confident and eloquent 13 year old black British boy:

Cliff: - they keep putting us down, and cos I think cos then that's why Brixton is the way it is, so if they think we are scum, then we will act like it, and then we will go and shoot people and everything else. If that's the way they want us to be, cos that's the way that everyone is looking at us, especially at black people in Brixton, not so much white people in Brixton.

Neighbours, in their quest to disparage Brixton and their relationship with the area, maintain that stigmatising representations of Brixton are ‘true’. In the case of

representations in the media, we have already seen how neighbours insist on the ‘reality’ of the images presented in *Electric Avenue*. Occasionally, neighbours made comments in focus groups that demonstrated that they themselves accept and develop racist social representations. Some of the black boys, for example, insisted that black people are more violent than white people, while white people prefer to argue than use their physical strength (Connor and Cliff). Here is another example, from a 12 year old African-Caribbean girl:

#### 2.4. “It’s good to be bad”

One response to threats to self-esteem is to accept and “play the role” of the stigmatised (Goffman, 1968). This means “accepting the behavioural prescriptions associated with the threatening position; living up to expectations” (Breakwell, 1986, p. 121). This is a strategy that young people in Brixton may adopt. I explored this in follow-up discussions with fifteen of the students already in the study. I asked whether Brixton really was ‘bad’. Grace, a dual-heritage girl, whose own feelings towards Brixton were ambiguous, explained it to me. These are my notes on her response:

Grace said that she thought Brixton was bad, as they are bad people there. She said that “the people there: they want to be bad. Cos you see that to them to be bad is a good thing. It’s good to be bad. Like all the boys who come from Brixton, when they act bad and that, people will say, ‘Oh no! ‘It’s the Brixton boys!’ And they like that.”

I ask what she means to say “act bad”.

She says “if you look at them, they will say ‘what are you looking at me for?’ And they are with all of their friends and you’re just alone, so they try to scare you”.

It is likely that children who apply the representation ‘Brixton is Bad’ to themselves will play the role of the ‘bad’, deviant youth and, hence, will experience great difficulty in accepting social codes and school discipline. These children are likely to be excluded from schools, as SH1 explained in a follow-up inter-view<sup>2</sup>. Because this research only includes schoolchildren, children with such spoiled identities are likely to be underrepresented. However, there is ample indirect evidence for ‘role playing’ in the

<sup>2</sup> In Britain African-Caribbean children are 4 to 6 times more likely to be excluded than their white and Asian counterparts, for fewer offences, less serious offences and at a younger age. In Brixton they are 10 to 15 times more likely to be excluded (German, 1999).

accounts given both by children and adults. SH1, for example, discusses the high level of school exclusions in Brixton, particularly for black boys. She continues:

SH1: And at the moment there is a problem about marginalisation. You know, if you look at the exclusion statistics, there is a problem. I think the girls find it very difficult in terms of, because, on one level, they are teenage girls, they are interested in boys. But they mostly see these boys as no-hopers, ... They truant from school and come and hang around the gates waiting for the girls. ... And some of the girls say that the boys are terrible, they hit their mum, but they will do whatever they want because the mother can't control them. And for a lot of the reasons they say that they can't be bothered with them, with black men, because they have a stereotypical image of black men.

Deviant behaviour is a common response to threatened identities, as Emler has clearly illustrated. He has shown that “children whose self-esteem has been lowered, perhaps by constant negative feedback from others, turn to delinquency as a means of regaining their self-esteem” (Emler and Reicher, 1995, p. 132). In Brixton deviancy is a central part of outsiders’ representations of Brixton and, more generally, of black people (John, 1993). Therefore, while anti-social behaviour may be a reaction to the social representations of Brixton, it also operates to confirm, and so justify, prejudice towards those from Brixton. Once again, the representation becomes the reality.

### 3. Contesting Representations of the Other

Although identity is rooted in our relationships with others, it is more than the simple taking on of the impressions of the other. The confident child does not adopt the representations that others have of her without some protest, without some reworking of these representations. “These contests over meanings”, Ryan (1999) has also found, “occur regularly in schools” (p.183). Identities should be a reaction to, or a reaction against, the way others see us. Through their need to construct a positive social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), many young people in my study found ways to challenge and reject representations that they recognised as prejudice. As audience studies generally show, people “are already critical, active viewers and listeners, not cultural dopes manipulated by the media” (Budd *et al*, 1990, p.170). The material presented in Chapter Seven demonstrated this in showing how, in identifying with Brixton, some adolescents are highly critical of images of Brixton.

“Can a dominant regime of representation be challenged, contested or changed?” Hall has asked (1997a, p. 269). Brixtonites show that this is possible. Insiders who have strong relationships with others in the area, with their family and their school are better positioned to reject stigmatising representations. In Breakwell’s (1996) terms, they ‘reconstrue’ the threat to identity. They criticise outsiders’ views; they challenge them; they recast them in a more affirming mode. Asserting a version of Brixton as a community united against prejudice is one way of achieving self-esteem and community pride. As other social psychologists have found, “the targets of prejudice do not always internalise the devaluation they experience, and often they have high esteem” (Crocker and Quinn, 1998, p. 186). There are many young people in Brixton who, I go on to demonstrate, have a “very positive self-image, and that is reflected in their view of the community in which they live” (SH1).

### 3.1. Encouraging self-confidence

As Breakwell (1986) has pointed out, “individuals differ in their ability to evolve coping strategies and mobilise them against threat” (p. 107). We have seen in this thesis that different people in Brixton adopt different strategies in negotiating an identity based on social representations of Brixton. Some children acknowledge the stigma of being-from-Brixton, but find ways to manipulate dominant social representations in order to develop a community identity of which they are proud. Others struggle to develop such self-confidence, and accept the stigmatising representations of the area in which they live. This, as I have shown, can lead to an ambiguous self-image. How can we explain this difference?

In follow-up interviews with school-heads, I posed this very question. As I had deduced myself from the analysis of the focus groups, these teachers felt that both the school and the family play a crucial role in encouraging children’s self-awareness and self-confidence. Significant adults in the children’s lives can provide them with the symbolic resources to confront and contest prejudice. What was clear from the research is that some children simply do not have the representational tools or social support to acknowledge stigma, let alone develop oppositional representations. As self-identity

emerges intersubjectively, against the backdrop of the ‘generalised other’, a child cannot develop the confidence and the emotional strength to challenge stigma alone.

In order to acquire self-confidence and self-esteem, one is “dependent on intersubjective recognition of one’s abilities and accomplishments. Were one never to experience this type of social approval at some stage of one’s development, this would open up a psychological gap within one’s personality, into which negative emotional reactions such as shame or rage could step” (Honneth, 1995, p. 136). In this way, significant others around the child can help or hinder the co-construction of self-identity. Without this encouragement from family and from teachers, the identity and the self-confidence of children is at risk. When the child lives in a stigmatised area, such as Brixton, the social psychological consequences of such neglect can be severe.

### 3.2. From parent to child

The child’s first attempts to make sense of the world are largely influenced by the values, ideas and practices of their carers. Parents have an enormous power in passing on their versions of the world to the child, and guiding the way the child comes to evaluate different ways of seeing this world (Donaldson, 1978). Racism, unsurprisingly, is often “transmitted from parents to children” (Jahoda, 1999, p.248; Milner, 1981). In this process, the child not only discovers how other people are judged; he comes to recognise how to judge himself (Foucault, 1979). As Mead (1964) stated, “the child can think about his conduct as good and bad only as he reacts to his own acts in the remembered words of his parents” (p.146).

School-heads discussed the influence that parents have over their students in forming their own expectations, helping them overcome prejudice, and impacting on their self-identity and self-confidence. Children are aware of this influence. Some of them, girls in particular, attributed their developing confidence to the values their mothers had taught them. Vicky, for example, declared:

Vicky: Cos my mum brought me up to say that I always deserve respect. She says that no matter what colour you are, no matter where you come from, what you look like, how deformed you are: you deserve respect. It doesn’t matter, you deserve respect. And I will have it no other way.



Inevitably, not all parents have the resources to help their child develop self-respect in this way. Both teachers and adolescents, particularly boys this time, maintain that some parents “give up their children too easy” (Dean) and may unintentionally lower children’s self-expectations. SH1 disclosed how some parents seemed to believe that black children are less able to conform to the rules of the school. She gave many examples of parents complaining that the school was demanding too much of their child, misunderstanding the difficulties of black children, and, at the same time, ignoring the white culture of those with white heritage. Here is one:

SH1: I had another mother, who was busy defending bad behaviour, and trying to say that the teachers are racist here, they don’t like black people, and they don’t understand the way that black people behave, and what she was basically saying was that we shouldn’t set our expectations of behaviour too high. And as I said I think that is so insulting, and in one sense (*laughs*) it’s almost racist. In the sense, in what you are saying is that your daughter, because she is black, can’t behave in the same way as a white pupil, which is not my experience at all.

All teachers agreed that these kinds of attitudes could have devastating consequences for the self-identity and self-confidence of their pupils. Without alternative representations children could grow up believing that they are less able to conform to discipline and less likely to succeed than people from other social backgrounds. However, representations are not taken on without reflection and revision, especially when they are so oppressive; there is always the possibility of contesting and transforming these symbolic constructions. One of the girls in the study gave an example of this, suggesting that children and teachers could challenge parents’ prejudice:

Chantelle: Some parents will want the children to sit next to a black person or a white person (in the classroom). The teachers help them work together as one. And when the children go home, the mummies will say ‘Oh! Don’t hang around with this person, because such and such a person is bad’. And they go ‘No, Mummy, it’s not what you want. It’s what I want. I want to be with everyone.’ And their mum might understand from them, (she) might learn from them.

### 3.3. Teaching children self-awareness

Social representations do not emerge in isolation. When children recognise an image of Brixton as ‘bad’, for example in *Electric Avenue*, a range of other representations are potentially available to them with which to interpret and evaluate that image. Hence, children who are acquainted with a broad range of representations of Brixton have the

resources to challenge and reject that image. Morley (1992) describes this as “the potential to respond actively and even argumentatively to the messages of the media” (p. 77). He continues:

Because we bring to our viewing those other discourses and sets of representations with which we are in contact in other areas of our lives, the messages that we receive from the media do not confront us in isolation. They intersect with other messages, from other institutions, people we know, or sources of information that we trust. Unconsciously, we sift and compare messages from one place with those received from another.

For many in Brixton the gap between how others see them and how they see themselves is so immense that this process of comparison becomes very conscious indeed. For at least one of the school-heads in the study, this was “a priority in terms of social education” (SH1). In all my meetings with her she stressed the importance of challenging prejudiced views and providing “more affirming” images for those living in the area. Her commitment to developing cultural awareness, to encouraging the appreciation of one’s cultural heritage, and to confronting prejudice pervaded the culture of the school.

All schools stressed the benefits of a multicultural school environment “as an educational resource” (school3 prospectus). All three school-heads spoke of the knowledge and tolerance that a diverse school population brings. In particular, school1, mentioned above, stood out in asserting the importance of cultural identities within the school. This was apparent in terms of the multicultural heritage expressed in the posters, drawings and stories that decorated school walls. The head of this school felt “very strongly” about the need to promote discussion within the school on issues of citizenship education, cultural heritage, community pride and self-worth. So much so, in fact, that the school had developed a ‘cultural heritage’ module for students in their first year at the school, which enabled them “to examine their own heritage and share it with others, in a way that is really affirming” (SH1). She explained:

SH1: We believe that we can't be a multi-, successful, thriving, multi-ethnic, multicultural community unless we pay attention to these things, unless we seek every opportunity to affirm the pupils as what they are. ... They know they are valued and they have a right to a cultural identity. ... I think that cultural identity is dynamic, is moving, and I think they are very much a part of what I would call the multicultural British experience. That their culture is not Jamaican, it's not West African, it's multicultural British. And I think that that is very important that they realise that, but I think that it's also more important that they realise they have contributed to this present culture, that they have a rich cultural heritage on which to draw. I think that they really need to know, you know, where they are coming from in order to be able to go forward with confidence.

The other two schools in the study acknowledged the importance of encouraging cultural awareness, community identity and self-respect. However, financial and organisational obstacles meant that, in fact, culture, heritage and identity were given less attention. SH2 admits that they are "constrained" in what they can teach by the National Curriculum. She disclosed:

SH2: But you see there are some things, I mean, which we can't. Though we try to address as much as possible. Even when I was teaching a Year 8 group, after about a term they said 'When are we going to do any black history, Miss?' I mean, you know, there are certain things that we just cannot change because it's all to do with the curriculum. ... Cos we are told what books to teach them, and blah, blah, blah. So it is a problem.

Failing to address the needs of a multicultural community and failing to find ways to affirm cultural diversity and community pride can have damaging consequences in the all-round education of the child (John, 1993). Indeed, students at school2 appeared both less knowledgeable about their cultural heritage and less confident than students at other schools. Other studies in schools have found a direct relationship between the cultural curriculum and problems of identity (e.g. Kitwood, 1983). Stretching the National Curriculum to encompass the concerns of many different ethnic groups in a multicultural area is difficult but possible, as SH1 insists:

SH1: You look for ways through the National Curriculum. There is so much wealth in the National Curriculum if you bother to actually work at it. Even History. English is so easy. History – we had people here from Kings College (University of London): classics students who helped our girls do a project on blacks in Roman history. It's easy, well not that easy, you just have to be creative.

This teacher also stressed the importance of encouraging open discussion and "getting them to appreciate each other" (SH1). In order for the children to develop their own views and the self-confidence to express them, they need to explore these issues in

interaction with others. Here the difference of others' opinions helps them clarify their own. In the focus groups, it was striking that children from this school, in comparison with those from the other schools, not only used more sophisticated vocabulary in discussing such abstract issues, but also displayed greater respect for, and interest in, views that they did not share.

Through collectively establishing a school ethos that respects difference, affirms diverse identities and challenges stigma, some pupils "leave school with a degree of dignity and confidence that astonishes people" (SH1). They not only demonstrated a way of coping with stigmatising social representations, they had also developed ways of making the experience of living in Brixton empowering. Those who are fortunate enough to go to a school with the resources and the commitment to encourage self-confidence and cultural awareness are likely to develop into confident, self-assured and respectful young adults. Indeed, it was evident that students at this school had benefited tremendously from this dedication. They were a credit to the school philosophy and testimony to the importance of understanding the dialectic between representations of others and representations of ourselves.

#### 3.4. Challenging stigma

However threatened, however fractured the self is, there is always reconstruction, there is always a re-arranging of representations of self. Even in Fanon's (1952) anguished account of the colonised psyche, there is the outrage and the passion of a self reworking an identity. Through collectively changing "the way we look at ourselves and the world ... we can change how we are seen" (hooks, 1992, p.6). Some insiders described how they resist stigmatising representations by asserting a different version of Brixton. This demonstrates what Fiske (1996) has called "their power to contest meanings" which "enables them to produce cultural formations through which they can speak and circulate their meanings" (p. 219). At different times in a focus group, Cliff, a very confident thirteen-old-year boy, for example, advised his classmates to ignore or contest outsiders' prejudiced views of Brixton. For instance:

Cliff: If someone was to call me a racist name, I would just let them get on with it and don't retaliate, cos if I start (to) retaliate then everyone will start and then just one big war, and eventually it would break out and someone would end up getting killed. It's not worth it, so I just, if I hear it, I just walk away from it. So, if they don't like it – tough.

Like Cliff, other children are able to reject stigma. One way of coping with threatened identities, Breakwell (1986) has described, is to challenge “the right of other people to make judgements about the characteristic” by suggesting that “the judgements of others are not legitimate or valid unless they can claim personal experience of the position” (pp. 105-6). It was common for insiders to adopt this strategy in claiming that “people always downgrade Brixton when they don’t know much about it”, as Vicky put it.

In Chapter Seven I showed that insiders distinguished between the representation and the reality of Brixton being ‘bad’. For them, their understanding of Brixton ‘is’ the reality; outsiders’ views of Brixton, by contrast, are simply uninformed “images” (Aimee) or “stereotypes” (Natasha). This is a way of coping with threats to their self-identity and self-esteem. Stigmatising representations of their community and of themselves can be disregarded in this way and are, therefore, less damaging.

### 3.5. Celebrating community

Given the right support, adolescents in Brixton can do more than simply reject stigmatising representations. In developing more affirmative representations, they form a secure sense of pride in their area. As we saw in Chapter Six, people in Brixton are proud of its difference, particularly its multiculturalism and openness to other cultures and traditions: they have restructured the social representation of Brixton as Diverse. In re-presenting Brixton as a multicultural community where cultural tolerance and respect resonate, children collectively embrace an identity as Brixtonites. As Ien, an older Chinese girl emphasises:

Ien: Yeah, cos if I had grown up somewhere else, somewhere less multicultural, I won’t, it would just be different. You just wouldn’t be affected like the way you are. Cos it’s doing something positive. It’s opening your eyes up to different people. So, I am really proud of where I come from.

The experience of going “through the eye of the needle of the other”, as Hall put it (1991a, p.21), is, for some children, liberating. The consequences of stigma, Ainlay *et al* (1986), have recognised, are both “dehumanising and inspiring” (p. 7). To overcome stigma, children need social support, tools to construct oppositional representations and the confidence to defend a positive community identity. To adopt the perspective of the

other, acknowledge prejudice in the eye of the other and resist its threat, is a difficult feat. For those who achieve it, there are significant rewards: tolerance of difference, community pride, and high self-esteem. Stigma, paradoxically, may be “the catalyst for the emergence of a new and vibrant self” (Ainlay *et al*, 1986, p. 7).

Everyday experiences of community and culture in Brixton are not solely of oppressive racism and spoilt identities. Here there is celebration of cultural differences and of new ethnicities that incorporate white, black, British, European, Asian, African and African-Caribbean identities. As in Back’s study of *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture*, “it is not a matter of ‘mixing heritages’ but of making a new heritage” (Back, 1996, p.52).

Because Brixton is such a diverse area, difference permeates everyday life. Different foods, musics, religions, and ideas mix in a colourful display of cultural diversity and cultural tolerance. Children suggest that difference breeds respect for oneself and for others. People in Brixton, they suggest, value cultural difference and actively seek out new knowledge and new experiences. This echoes Hannerz’s (1990) understanding of cosmopolitanism as “a willingness to engage with the Other” and an “openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity” (p. 239). Gillespie, in commenting on Hannerz, has found evidence of such competencies in the young of Southall, a largely Asian community in West London. She describes these as “the ability to adapt flexibly to other cultures” and “skill in manoeuvring in and between particular cultures” (Gillespie, 1995, p.21).

The young of Brixton, in a remarkably similar way, proudly describe such assets as distinguishing features of people brought up in diverse communities. The mix of ethnicities and cultures in Brixton, insiders claim, “enriches” their lives (SH3) and leads to increased tolerance. In a focus group, a Nigerian girl proudly asserted:

Danielle: It’s good to live in Brixton, yeah, because you get to like look at the ethnic groups and learn about their differences and learn about their religions and how they do their things - so it is really good to be in Brixton.

Children in all three schools in Brixton displayed such pride to varying degrees. Black children, as being more likely to be associated with the area, and especially black girls,

as being less likely than black boys to suffer from racist stereotypes about Brixton, were the most insistent on the value of being from-Brixton. Particularly those from school1, which prioritised multiculturalism and self-confidence in the day-to-day running of the school, stood out in asserting their pride in being from a multicultural community and in being-from-Brixton.

Living in a stigmatised area does not necessarily lead only to the trauma of recognising prejudice in the eye of the other. Social psychologists are wrong to overstate the extent to which “stigma is a devaluing social identity” (Crocker and Quinn, 1998, p. 505). These authors provide a comprehensive review of studies that document that “people engage in a wide variety of strategies to maintain, protect, and enhance their self-esteem, both personal and collective” (*ibid*, p. 518). Gibbons (1986) has also listed studies that report positive self-esteem in various stigmatised groups including children with physical disabilities (Coleman, 1973), epilepsy (Arluck, 1941) and blindness (Williams, 1972). Likewise, research on racism has found that people who overcome stigma often have high self-esteem (e.g. Murrell, 1998; Honneth, 1995). The insiders in my study illustrate that the experiences of diversity, of dealing with difference and even encountering racism can be valuable tools in the development of community pride and positive self-identities. Through identifying with Brixton, manipulating dominant social representations of Brixton and rejecting stigma, these children emerge as strong, confident and ambitious. What is crucial to understand, is that this self-confidence can be achieved only intersubjectively, demanding both the challenge and support of others.

## In conclusion

There is growing criticism in social psychology and cultural studies of literature that overemphasises low self-esteem and identity crises in young people in multicultural societies (e.g. Tizard and Phoenix, 1989; Eberhardt and Fiske, 1998). However, as Back (1996) has correctly stated, “to suggest that racism does not provide black young people with dilemmas in terms of their notions of self would be to misrepresent the situation” (p.151). In my own study of young people in Brixton, I hope that I have illustrated the complexity of the dialectic of representation and identity, and not overstated the difficulties *or* the benefits of living in an area such as Brixton.

Challenging dominant representations and developing oppositional representations are tasks that require the love and support of others. Breakwell (1986) has theorised how the “support available from interpersonal networks and group memberships may be instrumental in enabling the person to feel confident enough to use the intra-psychic strategies of re-evaluation or re-definition” (p. 108). Both the school and the family, we have seen, are important sources of this support. Clearly there are other influences. As Ainsley *et al* (1986) have stated, “individual transcendence of stigma is dependent on many factors, such as cultural beliefs, social status, individual personality, economics, physical environment, and education” (p. 7). What is needed to fully understand why different children adopt different strategies in the face of stigma is thorough research into these factors. I hope that my thesis may contribute to this field in mapping out some of the social psychological processes involved.

Social representations, or “cultural meanings are not only ‘in the head’”, Hall (1997a) has pointed out. “They organise and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects” (p. 3). What I hope I have illustrated in this chapter is that social representations have a real, practical effect on the everyday experience of living in Brixton. I have argued that stigmatising representations of the area where one lives can profoundly impact on one’s self-identity. Children who do not have the representational resources to acknowledge and reject such stigma struggle to assert a confident and proud sense of themselves. They see an image of a deviant, hostile and aggressive youth in the eye of the other and they may come to recognise this image as self. Children who have the support to challenge prejudice directed towards themselves have the potential to develop pride in their claimed communities and pride in themselves. The key to overcoming stigma is, therefore, access to, and ownership of, the representational resources to develop alternative, oppositional versions of Brixton and, so, of themselves. The social psychological processes of forming representations of one’s communities and developing an identity in relation to these, and the social psychological consequences thereof, this chapter demonstrated, can only be properly understood as dynamic, interdependent and intersubjective. What this shows is that identity and social re-presentation are key dialectical processes in the social construction of communities.



## PART II: COMMUNITY IN CONTEXT

### Conclusion

In Part II of the thesis I have focused on the experiences of those in Brixton. I first examined how insiders and neighbours *Make Sense of Brixton's Diversity* in Chapter Six. Rich and informative extracts from focus groups and inter-views illustrated the dialectic between social re-presentation and self-identity. What emerged in this study was the importance of outsiders' representations of Brixton, both in the social construction of Brixton, and in the struggle for recognition and self-esteem. Chapter Seven, *Brixton is Bad – Representation and Reality?*, analysed outsiders' representations, primarily in the media. Media representations were accessed in two ways: first in the talk of insiders and neighbours, and, second, in a media documentary about Brixton teenagers. Representations of Brixton, this analysis showed, have been colonised by dominant racist discourses. The consequences of the stigmatisation of Brixton were explored in Chapter Eight, *The Struggle for Recognition and Esteem*. Hurt, angry and proud voices from the children in the study spoke of the profound impact stigmatising representations have on their lives. In the struggle to be recognised as they recognise themselves, the weight of the psychological impact of stigma crushes the self-esteem of some of these children. Those with secure social support and symbolic resources triumph in this struggle. Stigmatising representations, these children know, can be subverted into empowering representations.

Brixton, I hope readers will agree, has much to teach us. Throughout this thesis I have stressed that Brixtonites are determined to resist the prejudices of others, challenge stigmatising representations, and claim a community identity of which they are proud. Brixton is, therefore, an ideal place to study the dialectics involved in the social construction of a community. I hope I have already demonstrated that it allows us to investigate the social psychology of community – the necessity of community, the significance of community, and the consequences of community. The story of my study in Brixton is as complete as it can in this thesis: it is time to return to the broader theoretical concerns of our discipline. From here can we construct a social psychology of community?

## CHAPTER 9

### Towards a Social Psychology of Community

#### 1. From the Particular to the Universal

- 1.1. The social reality of Brixton
- 1.2. The social reality of community

#### 2. A Social Psychology of Community

- 2.1. The social psychological necessity of community
- 2.2. The social psychological significance of community
- 2.3. The social psychological consequences of community

#### 3. The Power of Social Representations

- 3.1. The ideological construction of communities
- 3.2. Claiming community as claiming rights

In this chapter I have two objectives: One, to restate the central concerns of the thesis and summarise its major findings and, two, to extend some of these arguments and outline their implications for a theory of the social psychology of community. On the basis of the particular example of Brixton, I propose three central tenets to a social psychology of community: its necessity, significance and consequences. I extend the theory of social representations in presenting a concrete example of how communities emerge in social re-presentation and are maintained, enriched and marginalised through competing social representations. This highlights the role of power and the possibility of resistance in the ideological construction of communities. Doing community, I conclude, demands rights to both equality and difference. Hence, researching community takes social psychology into politics.

## 1. From the Particular to the Universal

I began this thesis with the promise that I would end with a modest contribution to a social psychology of community. While it would be naïve to suppose that it was possible to develop such a theory on the basis of one thesis, there are valuable insights to be highlighted from the study of Brixton presented here. In exploring the social construction of Brixton, in mapping out the two dominant social representations of Brixton, and in examining the co-construction of self-identities in relation to Brixton, I have embarked on the social psychology of a particular community.

My investigation into the significance of ‘community’ in Brixton reveals something of the complexity of this enterprise. It has led us into an examination of the intersubjective and temporal nature of self-identity, the relationship between self-identity and social representations, the dialectic between representation and reality, and the stigmatising *and* empowering possibilities of social representations. There are two key interlocking issues explored: (1) the negotiation of social representations of the community, and (2) the co-construction of community identities. Focusing on these social psychological phenomena in Brixton has brought to light the dialectics of identity and representation in the social construction of a particular community.

As I explained in Chapter Two, *Theorising Community*, from the outset of this research I did not seek to defend a particular theory of community. Instead, I sought to discover what significance, if any, ‘community’ has in our everyday lives. When people claim community membership, when they distance themselves from representations of a community, when they impose these representations onto others, we can say that they are ‘doing’ community. It is only through an understanding of the particular that the universal can be approached (Morley, 1996). The particular case of Brixton, therefore, allows and calls for a more general social psychology of community. Brixton has important lessons for the social scientist of community. Let me restate these.

### 1.1. The social reality of Brixton

Brixton, we have seen, is a very real part of everyday life for those in this study. Insiders explained that Brixton is a community because “everyone seems to know everyone” (Cliff), and because they “work together” (Chantelle), “stick together” (Tara) and have “their own culture” (Riva). Despite the fact that there are no geographical or political maps of Brixton, and no social statistics that include Brixton as a distinct area, social representations of Brixton have tremendous power in constructing, restricting and supporting the various experiences of those who live in the area. The symbolic, we have seen, marks the lived reality of community.

In Part II of the thesis I described how social representations constitute the symbolic reality of Brixton, and how different people use these representations to establish, defend, and subvert different versions of Brixton. For example, in Chapter Six, *Making Sense of Brixton's Diversity*, I explained how the representation Brixton as Diverse is used by insiders and neighbours both to create a positive version of a tolerant, caring and multicultural community, *and* to denigrate those who live there as threatening, black and other. This showed how social representations are used in the co-construction of self-identities. Social representations can be used to claim community and demand community rights; they can also be manipulated to reject community as a way of protecting oneself against stigma.

Researching the co-construction of self-identities in an area that is spoilt by media representations brought the dialectics of self-consciousness to the fore. The inter-view and focus group material revealed the salience of media representations in the everyday experiences of children in Brixton. Exploring the dominant media representation of Brixton in Chapter Seven, *Brixton is Bad – Representation and Reality?*, revealed the dynamic between the symbolic and material realities in Brixton. Media representations feed into and delimit the social construction of Brixton. Images and narratives presented in a television documentary, *Electric Avenue*, can be interpreted to support stigmatising representations of

Brixton. The analysis of this programme showed that social representations of Brixton have been colonised by racist discourses on the dangerous black other.

The dominant representations - diversity and badness - pervade the everyday lives of those living and working in the Brixton area, I demonstrated in Chapter Eight, *The Struggle for Recognition and Esteem*. Social representations knit together the symbolic and material realities of Brixton. The practicalities of everyday life - going to school, going shopping, looking for a job, meeting the gaze of a stranger in the street, for instance - are all inscribed with social representations of Brixton. Stories from children in the study showed how these representations direct the impressions formed by the other (Ichhiesier, 1949), and so mark their own self-consciousness. Such stories revealed the guilt, the anger and the violence that stigma brings into the lives of these children. They also revealed the passion, the understanding and the psychological strength that is born in a struggle against stigma.

What drives my research is the desire to illustrate how social representations shape the social construction of reality. In this way social representations are both mother and child to reality. Social representations of Brixton stem from, and feed into, the realities of living in Brixton. These representations create a vibrant, diverse and proud community, and they establish a troubled, under-resourced, and violent reality. These representations may be harsh and destructive. Paradoxically, they may provide people with the symbolic resources with which to challenge stigmatising representations of the area in which they live. As such, I believe, the social construction of community is a pressing issue that social psychologists, in particular, must address.

### 1.2. The social reality of community

What I am at pains to convey is that social representations are far more than ways of understanding or ways of describing Brixton. They come to constitute the 'community'. They form the lived reality of those who live in the area and those who come into contact with it. Because social representations are the building blocks of identity, they too inform people's sense of self, sense of belonging, and sense of community.

Obviously it is not only children in Brixton for whom 'community' is a salient part of social reality. The disruptive contours of globalisation throw personal histories and cultural practices, private attachments and common values into competition. In doing so questions of identity, belonging and difference are thrust onto us all (Brah, 1996). Often the way we react to these challenges is to reject or claim community membership. In negotiation with others, in asserting or refusing community, we give 'community' social meaning, value and, therefore, reality. In this way, 'communities', as part of our realities, are socially constructed, developed and transformed.

Globalisation invades the unity and homogeneity of communities around the globe. We can no longer discuss identity, ethnicity or community as if they were stable or distinct entities (Hall, 1991a). As identities and ethnicities have become increasingly hybrid and contested, so too have the places and groups of people that we call 'communities'. Without reifying these terms, without seeking to objectify them, social scientists must tackle their complexities. A particularly fruitful tool with which to attempt this project, I hope I have shown, is the theory of social representations.

I have argued that social representations are worthy of serious analysis because they are far more than interpretative tools. They come not only to shape our understandings of intersubjectively-agreed realities, they also constitute these realities. Different representations are born of different histories; different representations give birth to different forms of the present and so nurture different potential futures. As theorists of our time, if we want to engage with potential futures, we must first develop the tools to theorise the concrete realities of the present. Social representations of communities, therefore, need to be studied because they have significant consequences for these realities. Through the examination of micro-qualitative studies such as my own, I boldly suggest, a theory of the social psychology of community can be broached.

## 2. A Social Psychology of Community

Throughout this thesis I have stressed the need for a social psychology of community. What would this entail? At different points in the thesis I have discussed the social psychological necessity of community, the social psychological significance of community and the social psychological consequences of community. It is now time to distinguish these three interrelated concerns, and to explain why each is important.

### 2.1. The social psychological necessity of community

One of social psychology's key contributions to knowledge has been the explication of the vulnerability, dependence and, indeed, impossibility of the lone individual. In her many branches, social psychology teaches us that culture is deeply constitutive of the individual. Theories of attitudes (Lalljee *et al*, 1984), attributions (Heider, 1958), discourses (Wetherell and Potter, 1992), identity (Tajfel, 1982), ideologies (Billig, 1991), impressions (Ichheiser, 1949), language (Vygotsky, 1978), roles (Goffman, 1971), self-consciousness (Mead, 1967), social representations (Moscovici, 1984), and thought (Piaget, 1928) all agree on this: the individual is, in essence, a social being. What this suggests is that we cannot *but* live in communities: we need to be in and of communities in order to develop a distinct sense of self, attachment, individuality and commonality.

Am I suggesting that we must all live in 'a' community? In a word: no. It is one thing to say that we need to live in relationship with other social beings in order to develop a common culture, a shared identity, a sense of difference and a unique self-identity. It is quite another to say that we all need to live in communities of some shape or form. It is important to be clear about this. Too often discussions on community slide from a broad generic conception of *community*, in the abstract, as the binding force that gives us commonality across humanity, to a narrower definition of *communities*, in the concrete, as particular places or groups of people united by common values, experiences and aspirations. Let us deal first with community in the abstract.

Clearly we need to learn about the world and so about ourselves in relationship to significant others (Winnicott, 1971). We need to acknowledge, develop and challenge the social knowledge of the cultures in which we live (Duveen and Lloyd, 1990). We need to establish common identities, social memories and cultural practices in order to develop an individual identity (Rutherford, 1990). One can say, perhaps, that we need to be in 'community'. This is not to suggest, of course, that a hermit living in isolation from others will automatically suffer a fractured sense of self. Here community is the outside world. In this sense, community is the generalised other (Mead, 1934) and, as a consequence, community is a social psychological necessity.

In affirming the social nature of self, a social psychology of community would extend social psychology as a discipline. However, such a psychology would do more than simply echo key insights of our discipline. In engaging with the lived realities of communities, a social psychology of community would provide a much needed focus on 'the lived'. In taking our theories into applied settings we can develop a social psychology better equipped to understand, critique and challenge the realities which we collaboratively construct.

If one attends to the social world in which we live one must acknowledge that communities are highly contested social phenomena. We argue over them; we claim the right to speak for them; we reject them; we shed blood over them. Community conflicts make up the terrain of the negotiation of identity, meaning, value and loyalty in our local-global age. Hence psychology, in an everyday sense, plays a crucial role in both the actualities and the understanding of these conflicts (Billig, 1996). Most often, we find that *community* is not a latent, abstract concept; instead, we find *communities* that give our daily practices, our political differences, and our understanding of ourselves significance. If social psychologists are to understand these conflicts we need to engage with "the changing social patterns of our times", as Bruner (1996, p. vi) has advocated. Theories focused on an abstract form of community will be of only partial value. If we are to unravel the complexity, the heterogeneity and the contradictions of communities, we must begin from



concrete experiences. We must, that is, explore the social psychological significance of communities.

## 2.2. The social psychological significance of community

To understand what a community 'is', what it means to those who identify with it and for those who are seen to belong to it, we need to explain the social psychological significance of that particular community. In the age in which we live, this is an urgent issue. We are overburdened with images of communities, claims to communities and struggles over communities. If social psychology is to contribute to community development, community politics and the lessening of community conflicts, as I believe it should, we must examine what significance 'community' is given in everyday interactions. What I have argued in this thesis is that an extremely valuable way of approaching this problem is with the theory of social representations.

Through this theory we can explain how 'community' can mean very different things to different people, and the consequences thereof. As a special object in our social worlds, 'community' is made meaningful, is stigmatised and is empowered through the manipulation of social representations. Put simply, communities are symbolically constructed through social representations. What this analysis allows is an examination of the dialectics between the symbolic and material realities of a community. The racialisation of representations of Brixton, for example, leads to very real experiences of racism and violence. Hence, the social psychological significance of Brixton is different for black and white, black and Asian, and mono- and multi-heritage children living in the area.

Communities become psychologically significant when the social construction of community enters into, and so shapes, our understanding of ourselves. When social representations of a community cut into our self-identities and self-esteem, they are psychologically significant. As a central psychological labour of adolescence is to negotiate a relatively coherent sense of self, research with adolescents, as those in this study have demonstrated, can be extremely illuminating. And yet, there are lessons here for all age

groups. The use of social representations to understand the areas in which we live, and to make our experience of them meaningful, is a psychological activity carried out by all of us in both collaboration and competition with others. There are many aspects to this: we construct community identities through taking on and developing social representations; we manipulate social representations in order to otherise and to stigmatise other communities; we challenge existing social realities of communities through the use of social representations; through social re-presentation we bolster empowering versions of 'our' communities and ourselves. Communities, my thesis illustrates, are social psychological phenomena.

As we use social representations of different communities to make sense of where we live, with whom we identify with and how we are different to others, they have an enormous impact on our psychology. In adopting, defending, rejecting and subverting social representations of different communities, we reveal our loyalties, fears and desires. Hence, the social construction of communities and its consequences is an urgent subject for our discipline to turn to.

### 2.3. The social psychological consequences of community

Back (1996) has argued that "communities do not exist *sui generis*, they are created and imagined on a, more or less, daily basis" (p.238). In social psychological terms, communities are 'lived' through the negotiation of social representations and, as a consequence, through the co-construction of community identities. Communities, we have seen, are not simply groups to belong to. They may be imposed onto one; they may threaten one's self-esteem; they may be a source of empowerment. Communities emerge as the sites of struggle in the negotiation of self-identity, belonging and difference.

Social representations of communities impact on our social psychology in shaping the worlds in which we live and in shaping our self-identities. We make sense of ourselves, of those close to us, of those strange to us, of both what is familiar and unfamiliar through social re-presentation (Moscovici, 1984). Social representations, therefore, play a powerful

role in the social construction of reality. When these representations concern the groups with which we identify they are all the more forceful. They can lead to discrimination, disadvantage and damaged self-esteem. They can empower self-identity, bolster psychological security and produce increased self-respect. The label 'from-community-x' may become a barrier to certain potential futures, as certain representations are imposed onto one. Alternatively, 'from-community-x' may be used as a symbolic resource with which to oppose stigma, to assert self-esteem and to insist on respect and recognition. The gaze of many - the parent, the teacher, the shopkeeper, the police-officer, the stranger, for example - carries images of communities. The psychological consequences of this gaze can be destructive or liberating, depending on both the content of these images and how the perceived makes sense of them. The social psychological consequences of community, therefore, can be extremely oppressive in delimiting versions of community and versions of self. At the same time, they hold the possibility of re-construction, empowerment and liberation.

The impact of 'communities' in our day-to-day lives is multifaceted. A psychology seeking to address this must focus on many things. On the basis of the work I have presented here I would suggest that the points contained in the following table be prioritised.

<i>Central Issues for a Social Psychology of Community</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The social construction of communities</li><li>• The role of 'community' in the co-construction of hybrid identities</li><li>• The consequences of conflicting representations of communities</li><li>• The dialectic between the symbolic and material realities of communities</li><li>• Representations of communities in stigmatising and excluding 'the other'</li><li>• Representations of communities as resources for contest and empowerment</li></ul>

There are many questions that a social psychology of community must address. When do social constructions of communities damage, and when do they support, self-identities? When is 'community', as a social psychological phenomenon, a resource and when is it a handicap? When, simply, do communities oppress and when do they liberate? These questions take the average social psychologist into what may be unfamiliar terrain: the role of power in the social construction of reality.<sup>1</sup> If a social psychology of community is to be taken seriously, the question of power must be addressed.

### 3. The Power of Social Representations

In examining the social construction of Brixton a crucial question emerged: who has the power to direct this construction? Social representations are more than social psychological tools that orient our understanding of the worlds in which we live. In supporting a particular version of reality they protect particular interests over others. Hegemonic representations pervade the dominant social construction of reality; oppositional representations contest these versions. But it is not the case that some social representations are more or less ideological than others, as Scarborough (1990) has suggested. Instead, it is more useful to examine how both hegemonic and oppositional representations can, in particular circumstances, be used ideologically to defend particular identities and to limit the interests of others. Hence, social representations do more than explain the *social* construction of communities: social representations provide the substance of the *ideological* construction of communities.

#### 3.1. The ideological construction of communities

Social representations construct different versions of a community. What are the consequences of these differences? Can we judge between different constructions of the same community? Following Foucault (1980), I argue that, while there cannot be

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<sup>1</sup> There are, however, many notable exceptions. Social psychologists who have tackled the question of power come mainly from the social identity perspective (e.g. Sherif, 1962; Ng, 1996), the critical discourse schools (e.g. Billig, 1988; Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 1998; Wetherell and Potter, 1992), from the social representations perspectives (e.g. Doise, 1978; Scarborough, 1990), and other fields (e.g. Foster and Louw-Potgieter, 1991).

objectively 'true' or 'false' knowledge, knowledge can be legitimate or illegitimate in terms of sustaining power relations. The reproduction of power depends, Thompson (1990) has argued, on the continuous and creative use and abuse of 'symbolic forms' that mystify, naturalise and legitimate social and political exclusion. In defining the symbolic borders of communities in ways that intersect with relations of power, social representations legitimate or contest exclusion. As Gervais and Jovchelovitch (1998a) have discussed, social representations are "normative structures. They legitimise certain understandings, beliefs and practices, while they discredit others" (p. 711). In this way, social representations are manipulated either either support a 'legitimate' version of the status quo, or to disrupt contemporary inequalities and injustices.

As Hall may say, different representations are articulated for different effects. Hall's theory of articulation is useful as it emphasises the expression or assertion of symbolic forms and, simultaneously, the intertwining of these forms in the ongoing (re)construction of social reality. While the articulation of Brixton as Bad or Brixton as Diverse is constituted through "non-necessary" links (Hall, 1996), these links are not arbitrary. The articulation of community has very real consequences, as we have seen. Social representations, Purkhardt (1993) has explained, "embody and define the experience of reality, determining its boundaries, its significance and its relationships". They both limit and extend possibilities. In articulating the social realities of communities, they have the power both to include and exclude. They are drawn on both to naturalise and legitimise relations of domination *and* to challenge and unsettle perceived injustices.

Because people speak from different perspectives they have different social stakes in maintaining and/or challenging the social construction of reality (Mugny and Carugati, 1985). Because they have different reserves of material and social capital (Putman, 1993), they have different levels of access to the public sphere of debate and critique (Habermas, 1989). Different people, therefore, have more and less influence in the ideological construction of communities. We have seen, for example, that particular social representations dominate the media - how challengeable are these? Which social

representations are being marginalised or suppressed? Whose version of the community has legitimacy?

These are important questions. To answer them we need to examine concrete instances of the ideological construction of communities, as Thompson (1990) advises:

Whether symbolic phenomena do or do not serve to establish and sustain relations of domination is a question which can be answered only by examining the interplay of meaning and power in particular circumstances, only by examining the ways in which symbolic forms are employed, circulated and understood by individuals situated in structured social contexts. (p.56)

In this study, I have given concrete examples of the interplay between meaning and power in the everyday experiences of children in Brixton. These show how social representations marginalise and stigmatise. In this way, social representations provide the basis for the ideological construction of Brixton. In some instances, social representations of Brixton threaten the potential futures of those associated with it. Here, social constructions of community are oppressive.

To go beyond these examples, to theorise the ideological construction of communities in general would demand further, more extensive research. The relations of power within the community and between different community organisations, as well as power relations between communities and states, and between local and global interests all need to be part of this analysis. As such, this project is well beyond the scope of a single doctoral thesis.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is beyond the scope of a single discipline; the study of the ideological construction of community should be an interdisciplinary enterprise.

Thompson's (1990) description of ideology as process, not an entity, is extremely useful. He defines ideology as "a creative feature of social life which is sustained and reproduced, contested and transformed, through actions and interactions which include the ongoing

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<sup>2</sup> In the future I hope to contribute to research exploring the ideological construction of communities, and the consequences of such. I plan, for example, to examine how the Internet provides communities such as Brixton with both the forum and the resources to contest stigmatising social representations and to assert alternative versions of community.

exchange of symbolic forms” (p.10). Not only does it demand that ideological constructions are examined in their making, it highlights the possibilities of resistance. Social representations are not simply impressed upon us without the possibility of debate, opposition and refusal. Even extremely disparaging representations of Brixton, we have seen, can be reworked to proclaim a proud community identity. Social representations of a community can, therefore, be empowering.

### 3.2. Claiming community as claiming rights

Social representations of community can, we have seen, have a disruptive effect on the ideological construction of Brixton. Together, children and adults in the area co-construct representations and identities of which they are proud. In doing so, they demand that they be recognised as they recognise themselves. They engage in a struggle for recognition. What makes this extremely complex is that there are different forms of recognition. In mobilising particular versions of community people may demand they be recognised as individuals, as family members, as social groups, as cultures, as nations, as human. In these demands there are claims to different kinds of rights: the right to equality and the right to difference.

In opposing stigmatising representations of Brixton, for example, children are claiming their right to equality in this society and, simultaneously, their right to be different. In challenging the ideological construction of Brixton, they are claiming a stake in this society and they are demanding their distinct contributions be noted. This is a battle for both equality and difference. In an increasingly multicultural world, such battles will become increasingly common.

“If multiculturalism is to have any meaning in the context of the twenty-first century”, Back (1996) has observed, “the idea of the existence of homogenous cultures and identities must be undermined irrevocably” (p. 251). The same can be said of community. In community conflicts around the globe the contradictory claims to equality and difference collide. Again, I want to emphasise the role that social psychology can play in making sense of such

contradictions. I started this thesis with a discussion of what makes our discipline distinctive. What our theories seek to explore, I explained, is how identities emerge from commonality; how, that is, our very individuality is born in a moment of intersubjective recognition. From a social psychological perspective, our difference and our equality cannot be disentangled. Hence, social psychologists are particularly well positioned to unravel the complexities of competing claims to community.

From a social historical perspective, claims to difference and claims to equality are rarely so easily reconciled. There is little need for me to remind readers of the violence that such claims produce. What I can do, however, is remind readers of how children in Brixton challenged what it means to be different. Those with adequate social and symbolic resources presented versions of difference that incorporated claims to tolerance, respect and the recognition of equal rights. In demanding an inclusive version of the area in which they live, they balance the claim to difference and the claim to equality. Understanding this, and presenting the social psychological dilemmas involved, takes us one step towards understanding how community, as a social psychological phenomenon, can be empowering.

Mobilising community can involve contesting stigma and developing affirming social representations. Hence, social representations of a community can empower groups and individuals to oppose and reject ideological constructions that would otherwise delimit their identities. In collaboration with others, denigrating representations can be reworked and developed to contest prejudice, inequality and disadvantage. In this way, social constructions of communities can be liberating. Claims to community, therefore, are claims to rights.

## In conclusion

Most psychologists harbour the desire that psychological knowledge will have an impact on the society. Most of us are gratified when such knowledge can be utilised in beneficial ways. Indeed, for many social psychologists, commitment to the field importantly depends on the belief in the social utility of psychological knowledge (Gergen, 1973, p.310).



This commitment Gergen speaks of is a valuable resource. This is not only because many social psychologists are motivated by a belief in the utility of their work; the application of theory to concrete social realities promotes social psychological knowledge. As critical psychologists have recognised - "If psychology is to be relevant to real life, it must begin with real life" (Tolman, 1994, p. ix). I hope that my thesis has convinced the reader not only of the value of this, but of the necessity of placing our research in concrete settings. While there may not be anything so practical as a good theory (Lewin, quoted in de Board, 1978), the test of a good theory is in its application (Moscovici, forthcoming). To develop a social psychology of community, and to offer this as a contribution to knowledge, we must venture into the practical application of our ideas. We must, that is, engage with community politics.

Social psychology has an uneasy relationship with politics. Our Cartesian legacy warns us against the bias and emotion of political debate (Ibanez, 1991). Social science, within a Cartesian paradigm, should not be a tool for political liberation, any more than for political oppression. This concern pretends to depoliticise our theories and protects us against demands to state our own political interests (Rose, 1999). In adopting this supposed 'neutrality', however, we collude with dominant representations of contemporary reality and thus help maintain the inequalities of the status quo (Rappaport, 1995). I agree with Ryan (1999) who has asserted that "social scientists need to abandon such neutrality pretensions and explicitly declare their intentions to work to improve opportunities for marginalised groups" (p.206).

Not only *should* social psychologists engage with the political in revealing their interests, I believe, we cannot present a comprehensive understanding of contemporary reality without the recognition of the political. I have argued in this chapter that we need to develop an extensive social psychology of community which places questions of power at its heart. In my own research I have embarked on this mission. In examining the social construction of a particular community, Brixton, I have explored the social psychological necessity, the

social psychological significance and the social psychological consequences of community in one concrete setting. Obviously the claims that I make here need to be developed across a broad range of contexts, with different populations and using a range of methodologies. What I hope that my thesis has provided, however, is one small step towards a social psychology of community. There is still a long way to go.

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# APPENDICES

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## APPENDIX I

### Data analysis in *Nud\*ist*

*Nud\*ist* is a computer programme created to index, search and develop theories from non-numerical, unstructured data. For a technical explanation of the programme one should consult the manual published by Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd (Version Four, 1997). For an explanation of the programme's history there is an informative chapter, *From filing cabinet to computer*, by the creators of the programme, Richards and Richards (1983). What I attempt to do here is support the claims made in Chapter Five concerning the rigour and the complexity of my analysis. I hope that the examples below give the reader an informed understanding of *Nud\*ist* and how my analysis has profited from it. Before I focus on *Nud\*ist*, however, I have to explain some details concerning the coding of participants and focus groups.

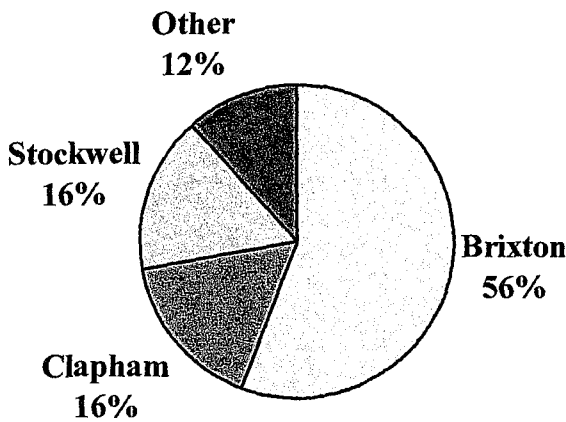
As I explained in Chapter Three, there are important similarities and differences between focus groups. The table on page 300 summarises these. As one can see from the SCHOOL row, two groups come from school1, two from school2 and three from school3. There were seven focus groups in total. In terms of GENDER, five of these groups were made up of girls ('G'). Two consisted of boys ('B'). This imbalance is reflected in disproportionate numbers of school-girls to school-boys in Brixton. The closure of two all-boy schools in the last few years has meant that there are very few nearby schools for boys from the area to go to. I tried out find out more about boys who live in the area by asking girls about their brothers, boyfriends and friends. Three groups were made up of young children between 12 and 14 years old and in years 8 and 9 at school; four groups of older children between the ages of 14 and 16 and in years 10 or 11 at school (see AGE row).

In this table, I have given coded the affiliation of the group (GROUP I.D.) as well as given the numbers of those who do, and those who do not, identify with Brixton (ALL I.D.). In three groups all participants except one identified positively with Brixton; these are labelled 'insiders' or 'in'. One group was made up only of those who distanced themselves from the area; these I have labelled 'neighbours' or 'neigh'. This was group 6. The other three groups, to varying degrees, contained mixtures of insiders and

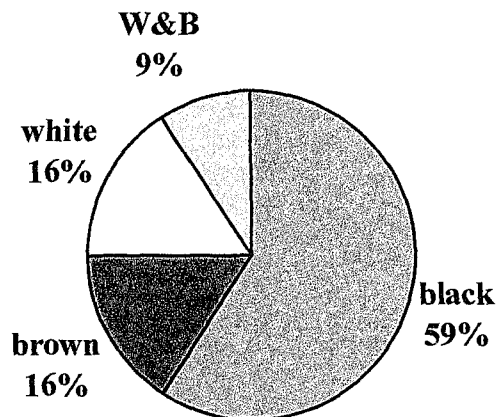
neighbours; these I have call 'mixed'. As explained in Chapter Five, there is only one outsider in the study, who was in group 2.

The table also gives the home ADDRESS, SKIN-COLOUR and ETHNICITY as described by each participant. In the 'I am' exercise, described in Chapter Three, most would spontaneously describe 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. Over half the children in the study claimed that they lived in Brixton. The others said that they lived in Stockwell and Clapham, or other places - Norwood, Oval, Streatham, Waterloo (see pie chart below). In terms of skin-colour, most children would spontaneously describe themselves as 'white', 'black', 'brown', or 'white and black'. (W&B in the chart and table refers to 'white and black' or 'white and brown'.) This shows what a salient issue skin-colour is in their daily lives.

### Home address



### Skin-colour



*Differences and similarities in and across focus groups*

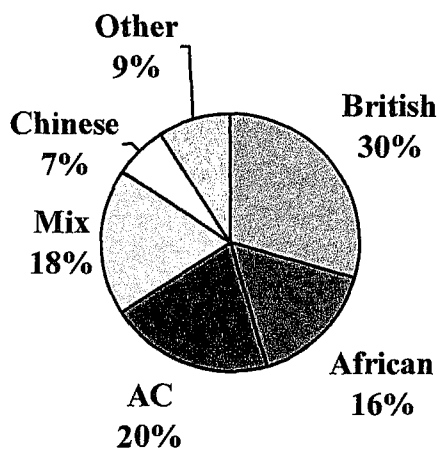
	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7
SCHOOL	SCHOOL1	SCHOOL1	SCHOOL2	SCHOOL2	SCHOOL3	SCHOOL3	SCHOOL3
GENDER	Girls	Girls	Girls	Girls	Boys	Boys	Girls
AGE	Older	Younger	Younger	Older	Younger	Older	Younger
GROUP ID	Mixed	Mixed	Insiders	Insiders	Insiders	Neighbours	Mixed
ALL ID	5 insiders 3 neighbours	3 insiders 4 neighbours 1 outsider	4 insiders 1 neighbour	4 insiders 1 neighbour	5 insiders 1 neighbours	6 neighbours	3 insiders 2 neighbours
ADDRESS	4 Brixton 4 other	4 Brixton 4 other	5 Brixton	3 Brixton 2 other	3 Brixton 3 other	1 Brixton 5 other	4 Brixton 1 other
SKIN-COLOUR	4 black 2 w&b 1 white 1 brown	5 black 1 w&b 2 white	5 black	4 brown 1 white	6 black	4 black 2 white	2 black 2 brown 1 white
ETHNICITY	2 Afric-Carib 2 British 2 Mix 1 African 1 Muslim	3 Afric-Carib 2 British 1 Mix 1 African 1 Bengali	2 Afric-Carib 1 British 2 African	2 British 2 Chinese 1 Mix	1 Afric-Carib 5 British	1 Afric-Carib 1 British 3 African 1 US/UK	2 Mix 1 Chinese 1 Portuguese 1 Vietnamese

*Participants' characteristics*

Names Group	Age	Group Dynamics	Skin- colour	Ethnicity	Insider/ Neighbour	Group I.D.	Home address	% talk	Gender	School	Yr
Aimee	14	Tol	W&B	Mix	In	IM	Brix	7.2	G	1	10
Alice	14	Tol	White	Brit	Neigh	NM	Other	1.4	G	1	10
Chantelle	14	Friend	Black	Mix	In	IM	Brix	10	G	3	9
Cheng	15	Tol	brown	Mix	In	II	Brix	2.4	G	2	11
Cliff	13	Friend	Black	Brit	In	II	Clap	12	B	3	9
Connor	13	Friend	Black	Brit	In	II	Sk	6.7	B	3	9
Danielle	13	Tense	Black	Afric	In	IM	Brix	7.5	G	1	8
Dean	14	Friend	Black	Brit	In	II	Brix	9.6	B	3	9
Dee	13	Tol	brown	Other	In	IM	Brix	3.9	G	3	9
Edwin	13	Tol	Black	AC	Neigh	NI	Clap	1.4	B	3	9
Elliot	13	Friend	Black	Brit	In	II	Brix	2.9	B	3	9
Frances	14	Friend	Black	AC	In	IM	Brix	1.5	G	1	10
Gabriella	13	Tol	White	Other	Neigh	NM	Brix	2.9	G	3	9
Grace	14	Friend	Black	Mix	In	IM	Brix	6.8	G	3	9
Ien	15	Friend	brown	Chin	In	II	Sk	10	G	2	11
Jack	14	Friend	White	Mix	Neigh	NN	Clap	3.4	B	3	10
Jayna	14	Friend	Black	AC	In	II	Brix	9.4	G	2	9
Jill	13	Tense	White	Brit	Out	NM	Other	0.85	G	1	8
Julia	14	Friend	W&B	Mix	Neigh	NM	Clap	2.0	G	1	10
Katrina	12	Friend	Black	AC	Neigh	NM	Brix	4.1	G	1	8
Kesi	12	Friend	W&b	Other	Neigh	NM	Other	1.4	G	1	8
Lesa	13	Tense	brown	Chin	Neigh	NM	Sk	3.9	G	3	9
Liam	14	Tol	White	Brit	Neigh	NN	Clap	0.65	B	3	10
Lily	16	Friend	brown	Chin	Neigh	NI	Sk	5.8	G	2	11
Louise	12	Friend	Black	Mix	In	IM	Brix	6.9	G	1	8
Mahua	14	Friend	Black	Afric	In	IM	Brix	2.5	G	1	10
Malcolm	13	Tol	Black	Brit	In	II	Brix	7.2	B	3	9
Miri	14	Friend	Black	Brit	In	II	Brix	4.5	G	2	9
Mollie	13	Friend	Black	Afric	In	II	Brix	4.3	G	2	9
Natasha	15	Friend	White	Brit	In	II	Brix	2.2	G	2	11
Neena	14	Friend	Black	AC	In	IM	Brix	5.1	G	1	10
Paul	14	Friend	Black	Afric	Neigh	NN	Sk	6	B	3	10
Pauline	13	Friend	Black	AC	In	IM	Brix	6.5	G	1	8
Riva	14	Friend	W&B	Brit	In	IM	Sk	2.5	G	1	10
Salote	13	Tol	Black	Afric	Neigh	NI	Brix	1.4	G	2	9
Sam	12	Friend	Black	AC	Neigh	NM	Other	3.3	G	1	8
Samia	15	Tense	brown	Other	Neigh	NM	Other	3.1	G	1	10
Tara	14	Friend	Black	Mix	In	IM	Sk	8.6	G	1	10
Theo	14	Friend	Black	Afric	Neigh	NN	Brix	9.1	B	3	10
Tom	14	Friend	Black	Afric	Neigh	NN	Clap	6.2	B	3	10
Valerie	12	Tense	White	Brit	Neigh	NM	Other	1.3	G	1	8
Weona	15	Friend	brown	Brit	In	II	Brix	9.8	G	2	11
Winston	14	Friend	Black	AC	Neigh	NN	Clap	9.4	B	3	10

The second table, on the previous page, gives this same information but, this time, for each individual participant. I have included it so that readers can check which children say what. Because of its importance, ethnicity is included in both tables. This was often something that, in general, I did not have to ask children to explain. In the 'I am' exercise it was the most common way of classifying themselves. Questions of nationality and Britishness would also arise in the focus group discussions. While most of those labelled 'AFRIC' called themselves African, I have also included here those who called themselves Nigerian and Ghanaian. 'AC' refers to those who called themselves Afro-Caribbean, and Jamaican. Children who called themselves 'mixed', I have labelled 'mix'. These include Aimee (English-African), Chantelle (Jamaican-British), Jack (British-American), Tara (British-Nigerian) and Louise (Jamaican-English). British includes those who call themselves British, English or Welsh. The 'others' in chart and table two are Bengali (Kesi), Muslim-Asian (Samia), Portuguese (Gabriella), and Vietnamese (Dee).<sup>1</sup>

### Ethnicity



As well as the factors discussed above, I have included two others: group dynamics and percentage spoken. In the early stages of data collection, I realised that the dynamics of the group could both prohibit and encourage debate, especially when emotional and controversial issues were discussed. Despite the fact that I had tried to arrange with schools to have groups of "good friends", some of them were not. I coded each child in

<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed to protect participants' anonymity. Many of these were chosen by the participants.

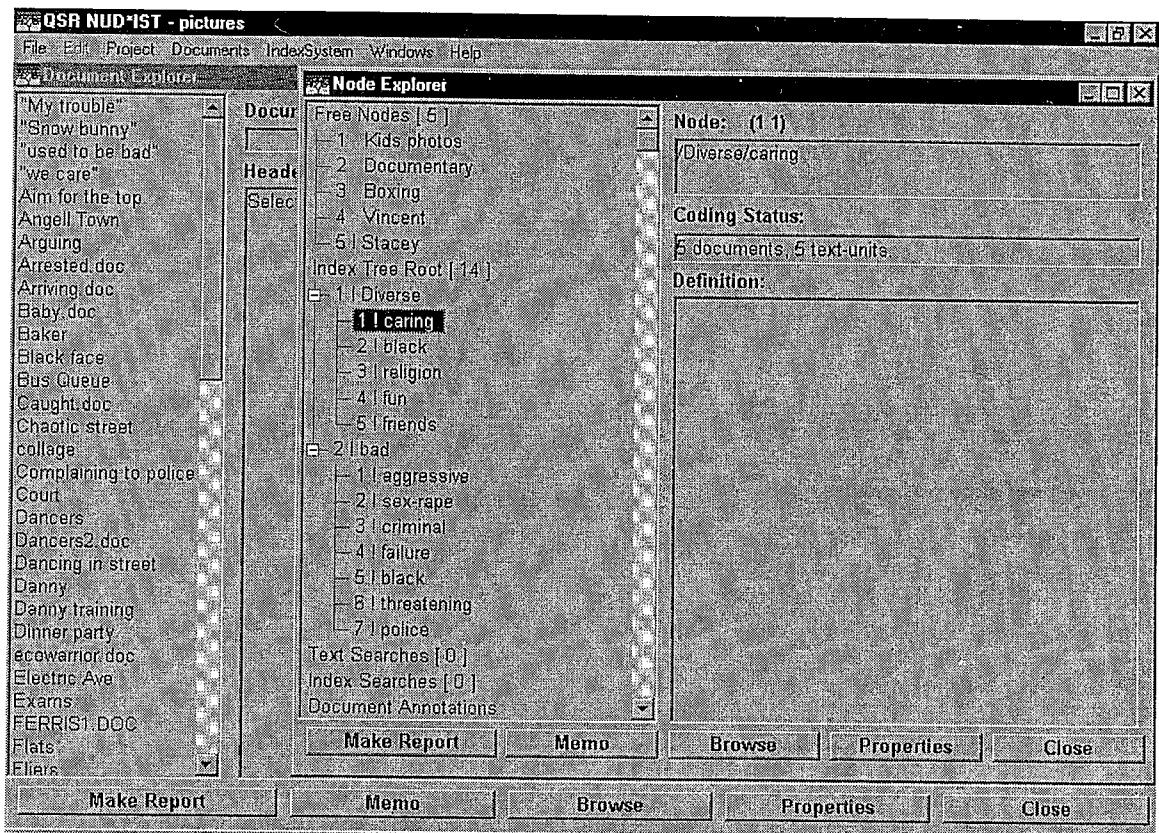
terms of how well they seemed to know others in the group and how well they got on with them. 'Friend' denotes that they seemed to be friends, showed that they knew each others' lives well, and demonstrated respect for differences of opinion. Most children fell into this category. I labelled another 9 children out of 44 as 'tol' for tolerant, as they seemed to tolerate difference without serious anger or disagreement. These children were prepared to discuss the issues, but not engage with each other. Finally there were 4 children, all in minority positions in their groups, who seemed uncomfortable at different moments in the discussions. They often disagreed with what others said and seemed embarrassed and/or annoyed with some points made by others. The others in their groups did not always treat them with the same respect that they showed others. These children I labelled 'tense'. These include the only outsider (Jill), a white English neighbour (Valerie), a Chinese neighbour (Lesa) and Danielle, an assertive Nigerian insider.

The other important variable here is how much people spoke. Hence, I have included the percentage of text units contributed by each participant in a focus group. For example, the first child on the list, Aimee, gave 7.2% of text units in her focus group. Most others contributed a lot less (see '%' on table). All of these factors were extremely useful in analysing who said what, when, and why. In order to make sense of these variables, I used the qualitative computer analysis programme, *Nud\*ist*. To display the relationships found I used the graphics package *Decision Explorer*.

*Nud\*ist* allows the researcher to import documents into the programme for analysis. These may be textual or graphic. In this study, I imported inter-view and focus group transcripts, participant-observation notes, photographs and stills from a television documentary. At first I coded the inter-views, focus groups and media material in three separate *Nud\*ist* documents. Once I could see that there was much cross-over in these three different forms of data, I created a fourth document where all three data sets were coded as one large data set. This had the advantage of looking for similarities and differences across all forms of data simultaneously.

Once these were imported into a document system the pictures were coded as a whole unit of analysis and the textual documents were coded into smaller units of text. The *Nud\*ist* window below gives the coding frame for 70 pictures in the analysis. In the left

hand column there is a list of pictures (alphabetically from A to F) and in the centre there is the coding tree.



For the textual documents, I took each paragraph of speech to be a text unit. This could be anything from a one-word answer to a long paragraph of text. For the one-to-one inter-views, where answers to questions could be extremely long, I re-coded each transcript with each sentence making up a text unit. Each document or unit may be coded in an unlimited number of containers, or 'nodes'. As soon as this is begun, the programme allows one to:

- search for patterns in the coding and build new codes;
- clarify ideas, discover themes, and store memos about the data;
- construct and test theories about the data;
- generate reports including the text, coding patterns and/or statistical summaries;
- display matrices and build models by linking with graphical software.

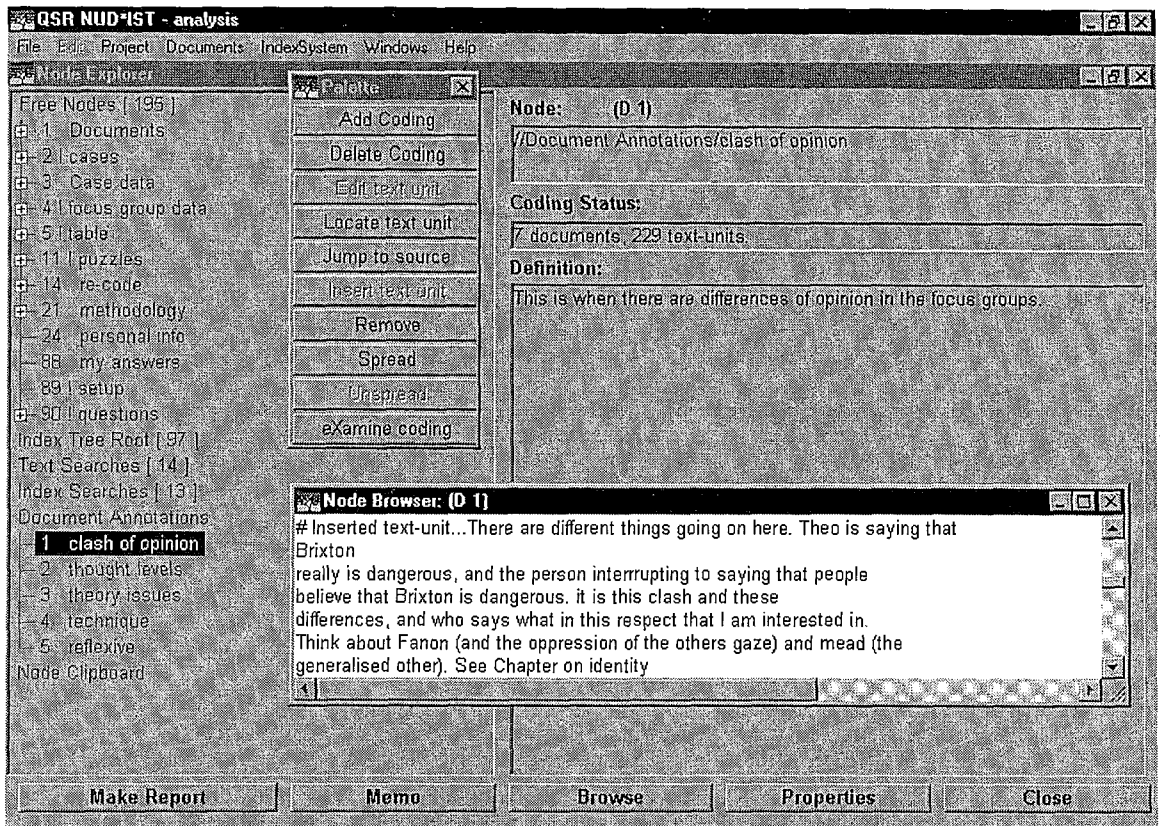
(Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd, 1997, p. 3)

Any text unit or complete document can be coded in many different categories. In my analysis all sections of text are coded a number of times. The nodes would include the social characteristics of the participants, the themes emerging from the content,



methodological issues, and concerns to return to. In the programme's indexing system there are six different places in which a text units can be found, in addition to its original document. These are:

- Free Nodes
- Index Tree
- Text Search
- Index Search
- Document Annotations
- Node Clipboard



In the main window, under Node Explorer, one can see that there are 195 free nodes, 97 nodes in the index tree root, 14 text searches, 13 index searches, 271 text units in document annotations, and a node clipboard. The clipboard works as a temporary location in cut and paste exercises, in the same way as a clipboard in a word processing programme. Document annotations provide a good place to store the changing interpretations of a theme or document. I have highlighted an example of such in the smaller window. Index searches are “ways of asking questions about your categories and your coding at categories” (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd, 1997, p.8). This allows the researcher to rethink and re-code material, to build new categories, to discover sequences and nesting of categories, to pull apart and explore patterns, and to construct a matrix to explore patterns (*ibid*). Overleaf is an example of one such matrix.

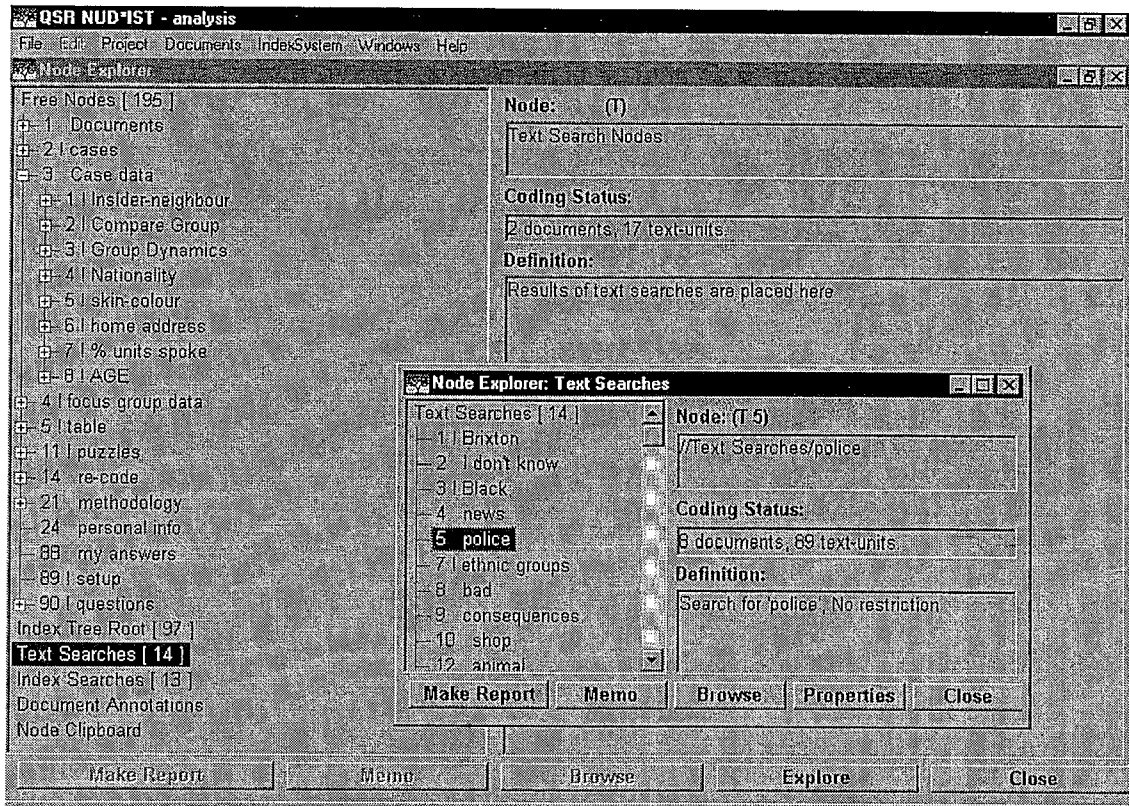
*Brixton's Reputation*

Characteristics	Bad	Crime	Rough	Poor	Dirty & smelly	Noisy
<b>Identity</b>						
Insider	56	123	50	26	2	9
Neighbour	15	83	14	12	15	2
Outsider	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Group</b>						
II	24	85	27	25	0	1
NI	4	12	2	0	0	0
NN	4	54	9	12	12	0
Nmixed	7	17	3	0	3	2
IMixed	32	38	23	1	2	8
<b>Dynamics</b>						
Friendly	51	167	53	35	17	9
Tolerant	14	29	7	2	0	0
Tense	6	9	3	1	0	2
<b>Ethnicity</b>						
Afric-Cari	15	56	13	6	5	3
African	9	45	11	7	8	1
British	16	75	13	25	0	1
Mixed	24	21	17	0	4	4
Asian	3	7	9	0	0	0
Other	6	2	2	0	0	2
<b>Skin-colour</b>						
Black	49	176	41	38	15	9
Brown	10	11	17	0	0	2
White	2	6	2	0	2	0
White & black	8	8	3	0	0	0
<b>Address</b>						
Brixton	49	103	35	19	5	5
Stockwell	7	36	19	7	3	4
Clapham	10	56	8	15	7	0
Other	4	9	3	0	2	2
<b>Age</b>						
12	6	19	4	0	5	0
13	23	78	11	15	0	1
14	34	93	30	26	12	8
15	6	10	17	0	0	2
16	1	2	1	0	0	0
<b>% talk</b>						
9-12	26	89	30	26	4	4
5-7	27	76	17	12	8	3
2-4	13	29	16	1	5	4
0-1	6	13	1	0	0	0
<b>School</b>						
1	25	116	55	59	22	3
2	19	31	46	0	0	0
3	71	250	31	4	9	18

This matrix explores patterns between nodes about Brixton's reputation (bad, crime, rough, poor, dirty and smelly, and noisy) and the characteristics of participants (which I have coded as 'case data' in free nodes). A matrix table gives the researcher a very rough idea of potentially significant relationships. It is only an approximate picture as the table gives the frequency but not the percentage of text units. For example, in the first row, the absence of text units given by outsiders may appear significant. However, as I explained in Chapter Five, there is only one outsider in the whole sample, Jill. This shy little girl made only ten comments in the course of her focus group. Therefore, it would not be useful to explore this absence further.

What we can see is that, in general, insiders discuss Brixton's reputation more than neighbours. Further exploration reveals that, while this is the case, insiders explain how Brixton is seen by the outside world, while neighbours assert that the reputation is the reality. *Nud\*ist* enables general patterns to be explored in minute detail. We can see in the table, for example, that it is mainly neighbours who refer to Brixton as dirty and smelly. Also we can see such a controversial topic is only discussed when the group dynamics seem to be friendly, rather than tolerant or tense. There are other patterns that need further analysis: why is it mainly black children who talk about the reputation? Why is it mainly those living in the centre of Brixton who discuss crime? And why do those in school3 have more to say about most of these topics than children at the other two schools? Index and text searches in *Nud\*ist* allow for finer and finer analysis.

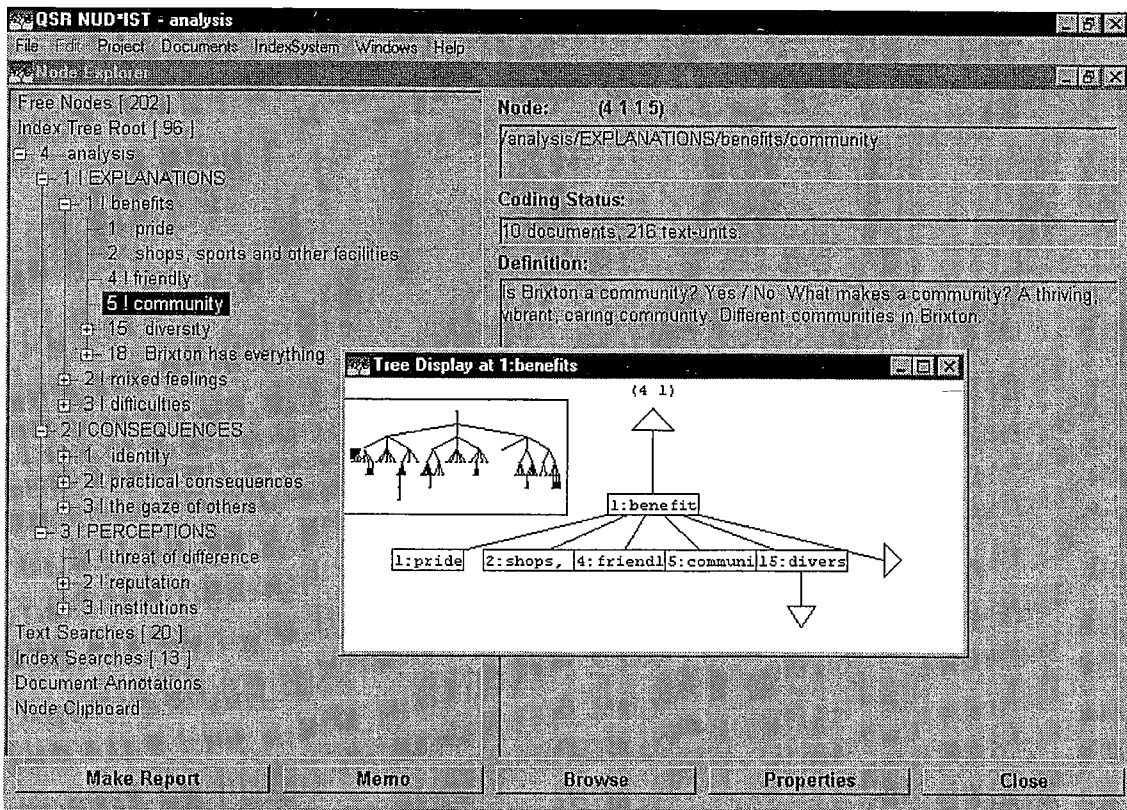
Text searches "provide ways of asking questions about the contents of documents, words people are using, recurring ideas and so on" (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd, 1997, p.7). For example, a researcher can quickly develop nodes on key topics by doing a simple string search or complex pattern search on important words. In my case these included "Brixton", "news", and "racist", among many others. Again, once a pattern emerges, it can be assessed systematically in more detail. In the picture below, there is a search on "police" highlighted, showing that 89 text units were found in 8 different documents. Once such a basic search is done, documents should be examined further for text units that the programme would miss, such as references to "pigs", for example.



Where there are no apparent patterns between coding categories, nodes can be listed in ‘free nodes’. In my project this mainly concerns methodological issues and information on the documents and participants. There is obviously a list of documents (1), and a list of text units from each person interviewed (2). Free node 3 contains the ‘case data’, that is, the social characteristics of each person involved. These include affiliation to Brixton, main affiliation of the group versus participant, the group dynamics, nationality, skin-colour, home address, percentage of text units spoken, and age. Other characteristics, that groups share, such as their gender and school, are recorded in free node 4, focus group data. The other nodes concern graphics (5), methodological issues (11, 14, 21, 24 and 89) and my influence on the discussion (88, 89 and 90).

Finally, and most importantly, is the index tree root. This “provides the option of organising categories hierarchically, in a ‘tree’ of categories and sub-categories” (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd, 1997, p. 78). This enables the researcher to study the detail of one theme, to explore the relationships between different themes and, simultaneously, to keep the whole picture of the coding frame at the touch of a button. Organising the nodes in this way from an early stage helps clarify and develop ideas. It

should provide a “growing map of a project, altered and elaborated on as the project proceeds” (*ibid*). This is the final version of the index tree in my project:



This shows the three main coding categories: explanations, perceptions and consequences, as explained in Chapter Five. As I have highlighted ‘community’ at project address [4 1 1 5], we can see that there are 216 text units in this node from 10 different categories. We can also see a longer definition of the node. As categories are better understood, the definition can be altered and/or a memo attached explaining changing and refinements. The [!] signifies that there is a memo made of this node, as there are for others. The [+] symbol means that there are more sub-categories within this node that are not shown on the screen. The [-] symbol means that these sub-categories are visible.

The second window on the screen displays the index tree graphically. The smaller version shows the whole frame, while the larger version shows a specific section of the tree. This is useful for tracking the interrelationships of different categories. To produce a hard-copy of these graphic images, one has to export the coding tree into a graphics programme such as *Decision Explorer*. As the coding trees below demonstrate, this is a highly effective way presenting complex coding frames clearly without overwhelming

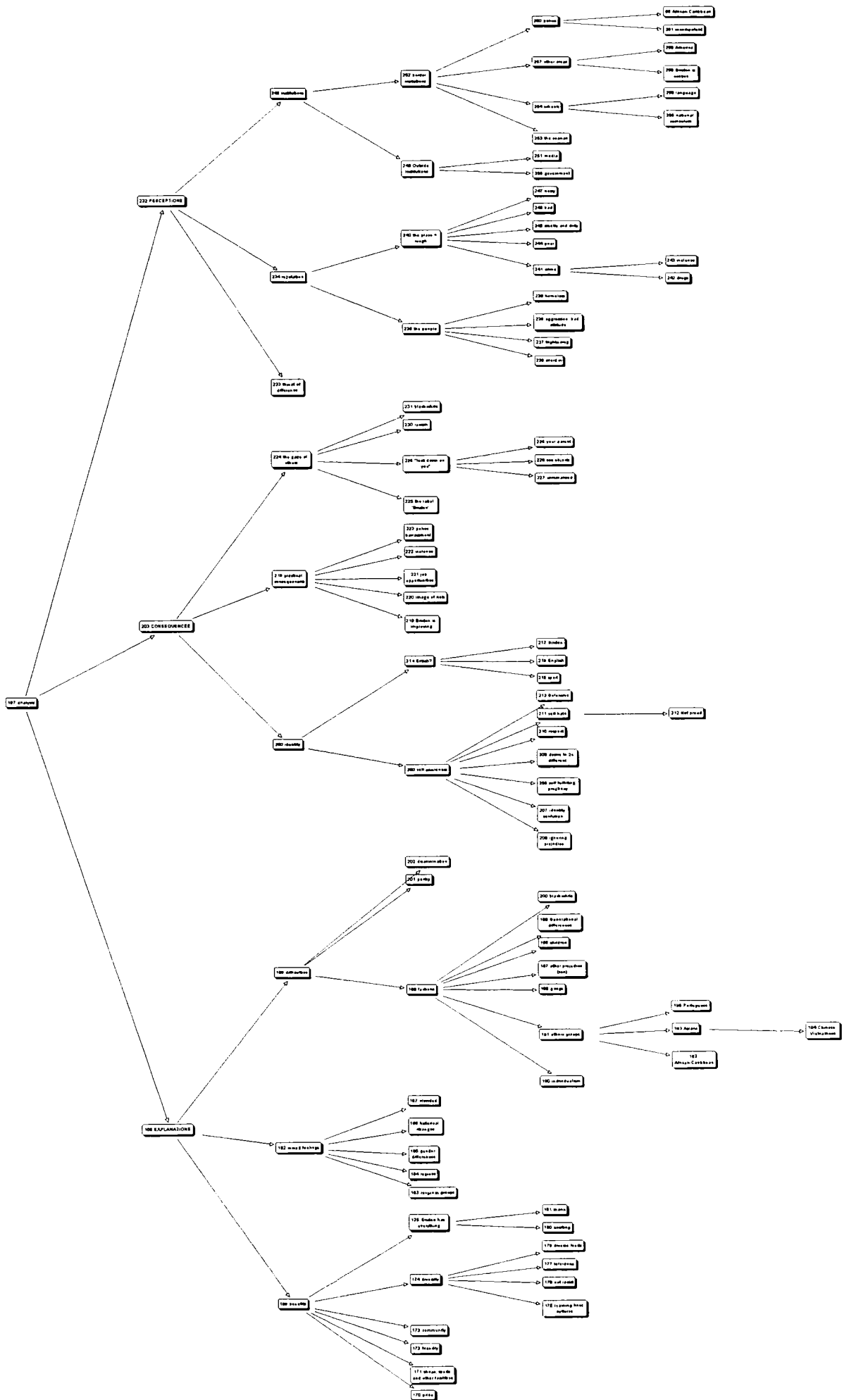
the reader with too much information. The first tree shown is a summary of the whole coding frame. The next three summarise the coding categories for the three main sections: explanations, perceptions and consequences.

What I hope that this appendix has done is provide the reader with the material with which to test the claims made in Chapter Five. I hope that I have demonstrated how the analysis was undertaken and how *Nud\*ist* contributed to the analysis of material, the development of ideas, and the testing of theories. Through the application of the appropriate theories from my discipline, *Nud\*ist* and *Decision Explorer* have enabled me to develop a critical and substantive account of the social construction of community.

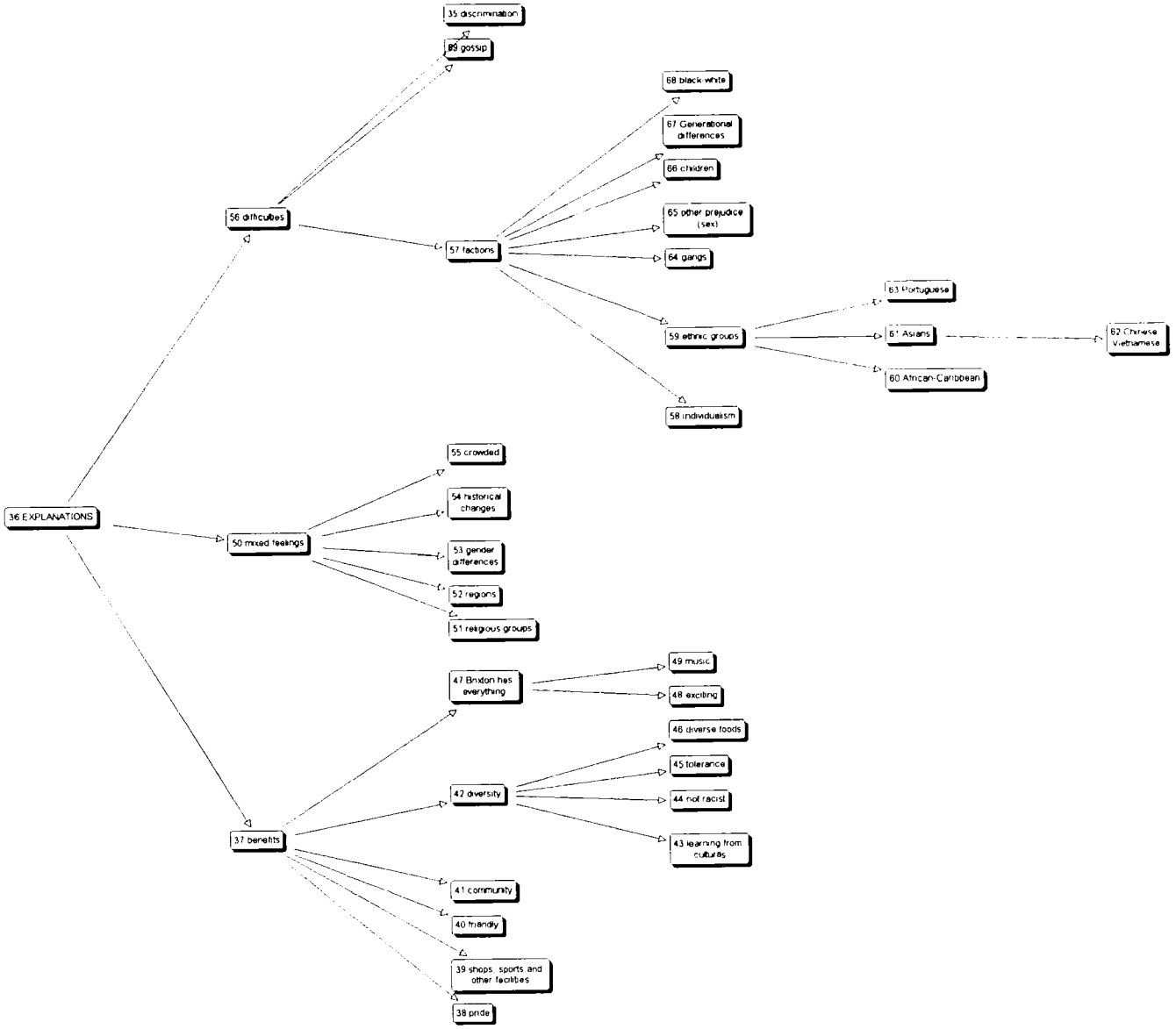
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# THE CODING FRAME

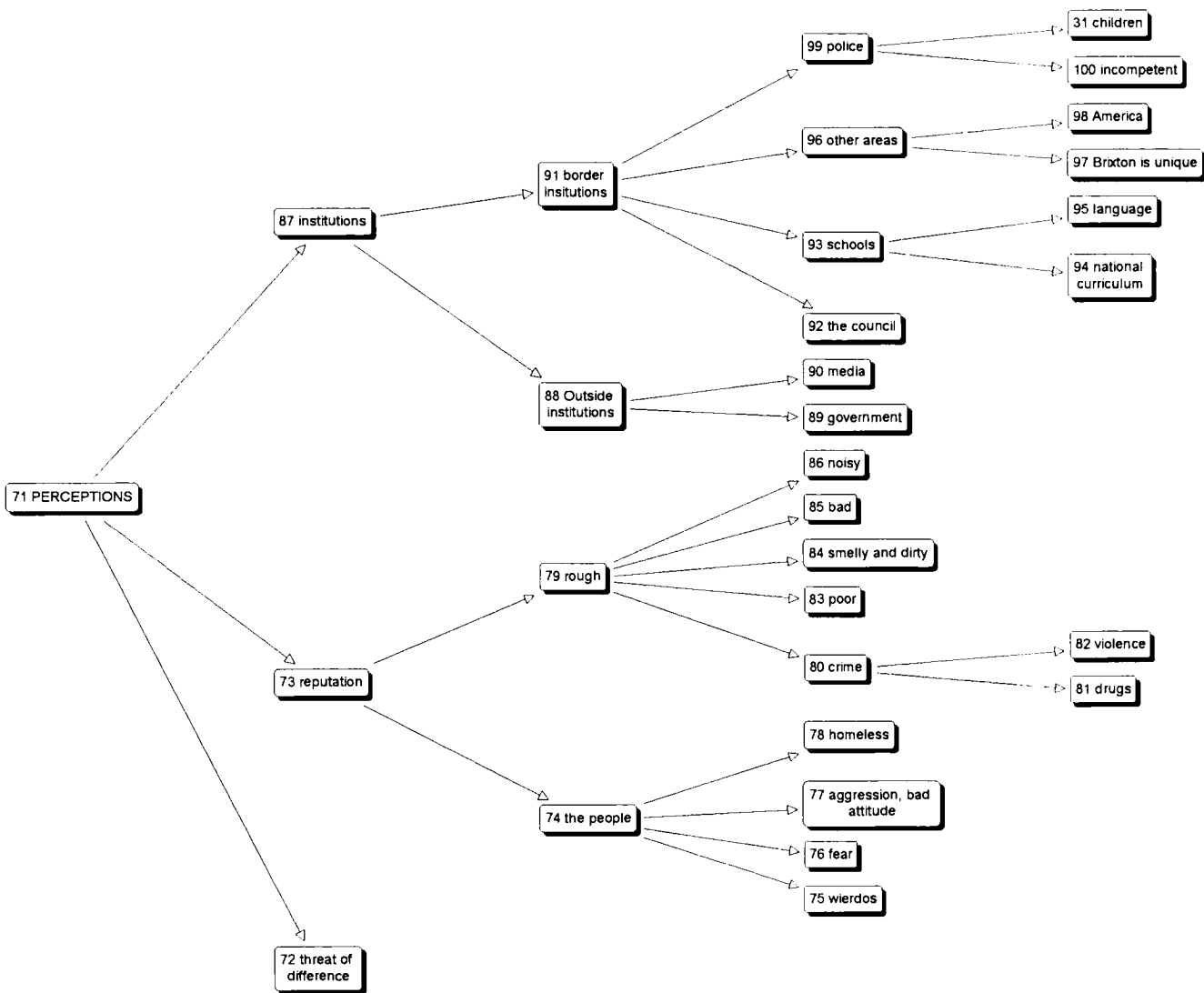


# EXPLANATIONS OF BRIXTON

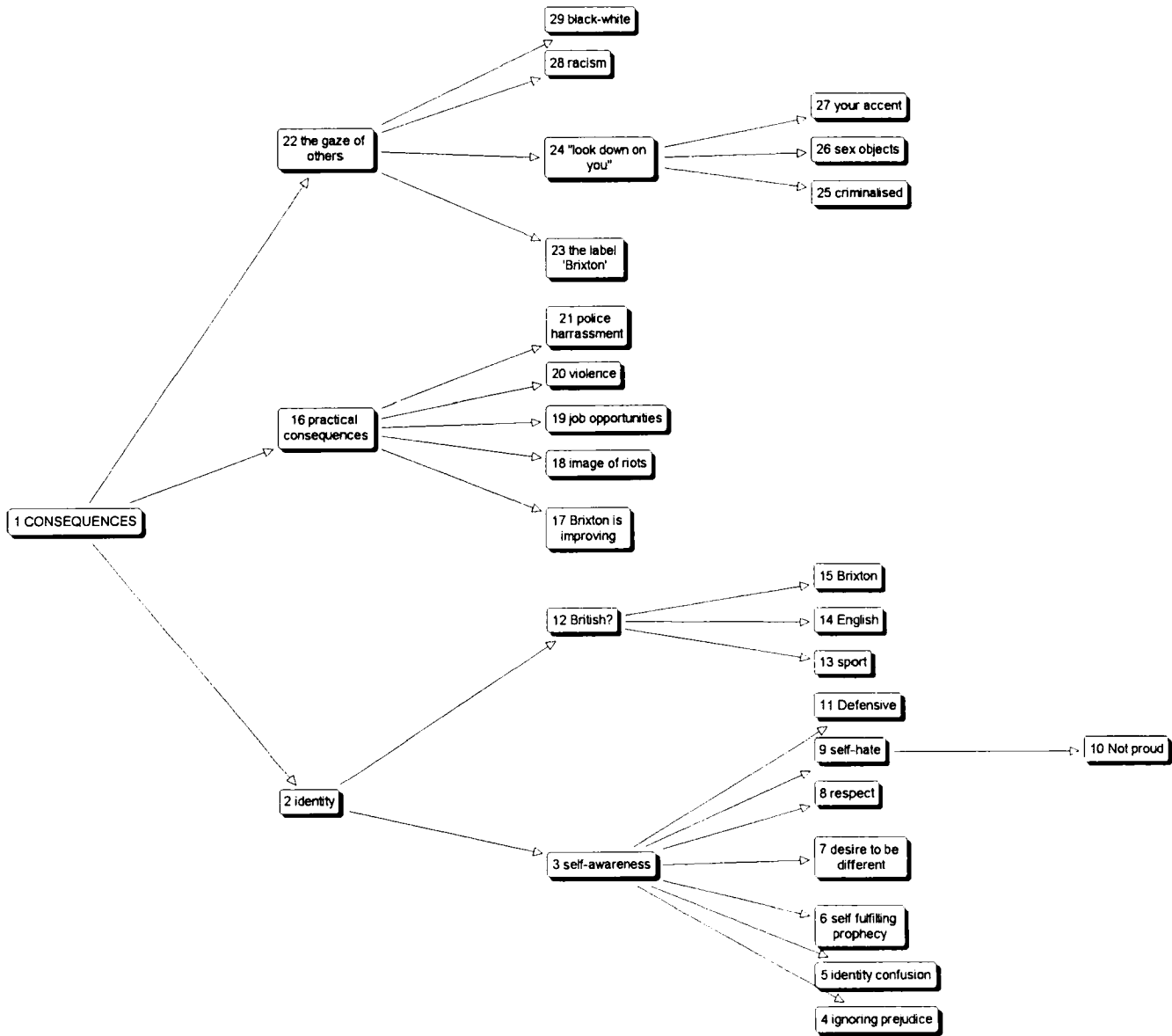




# PERCEPTIONS OF BRIXTON



# CONSEQUENCES OF DIVERGENCE



## **APPENDIX II**

### **A Brief History of Brixton**

Brixton's history is impressive. It is too extensive to be summarised easily. In this brief overview I shall attempt to provide the reader with an impression, at least, of the richness and diversity contained in Brixton's past. For a fuller account see the sources that I have referenced below.

#### Early history

The Romans were some of the first to live in the area now called Brixton. They built two of the main roads in the area (the Clapham Road or the A3 and the Brixton Road or A23) and there is evidence of Roman trade, farming and warfare. In early Saxon times, between 400 and 600 AD there was a settlement in the area of the one of the schools in my study. What are now Acre Lane and Coldharbour Lane would have been tracks through the marshland of the flood plain of the Thames.

Brixton, the name, is a simplified form of Brixistane. This referred to the stone of Brixi or Beorhtsige, who was a Saxon lord in the 11th century. He may have erected a stone pillar as a boundary marker, or it may have been his burial site. Brixton is mentioned in the Domesday Book. In 1197 the Archbishop acquired land in the area. Brixton continued to house the Archbishop right up to 1862.

#### 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century much of the Brixton area was agricultural land, providing fruit, vegetables and cattle to London's markets. It was also popular among the well-to-do of London as a convenient country retreat. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century Brixton was considered more of an upmarket residential suburb of London, rather than a distinct rural community. Its population was around 3 million, many of whom were considerably wealthy. The transport revolution, bringing omnibuses to Brixton from the 1830s, trains from 1862 and trams from 1870, opened up the area to lower class people, clerks and skilled people, who could travel to work in London. Economically the area thrived, attracting the earliest and the biggest department stores. Bon Marche, for example, Britain's first purpose-built department store, opened in Brixton in 1877 and was

followed shortly by Morley's and, in 1928, the first British Home Stores. The growing importance of the area meant that it was given its own Minister of Parliament in 1885.

Another claim to fame is Electric Avenue. This was the first shopping street in Britain to be lit by electricity - in 1888. It is also remembered in Eddie Grant's lyrics 'We're going to rock down to Electric Avenue'. Nearby is the public library that was opened by Sir Henry Tate (of the Tate gallery in Pimlico and of the sugar cube) in 1893. 1910 saw many new developments in the area: a roller-skating rink and a greyhound race track and 9 cinemas. Sole survivor of all these is the Ritzy, an arts cinema. By this time Brixton was well and truly engulfed by the sprawling capital.

Before the wars Brixton was a prosperous suburb of London. It was known as a place to go to avoid the smog of central London, and a place where ambitious architects were erecting bigger and grander shops, public buildings and residences. Both World Wars, but especially the second, changed all this. It is believed that some German bombers miscalculated the centre of London and, in error, dropped many of their bombs on Brixton. Because of the resulting severe damage an acute housing shortage developed in the late forties. Added to this, post-war redevelopment destroyed even more homes in Brixton.

Because of this, housing became cheap in Brixton. Brixton's Victorian legacy of large mansions made it an ideal boarding house area and therefore it was an automatic choice for Britain's first wave of post-war immigrants. In the fifties and sixties Brixton was a foothold for those looking for housing, especially poor Jews, Poles, Cypriots and those from the colonies who responded to "the Motherland needs you" plea. The Mayor, supported by the local MP, Marcus Lipton, a Jew, hosted a few events to welcome those first arrivals from the West Indies. Later arrivals followed, in search of relatives, friends, familiar faces and familiar food. These early immigrants developed the old market, established in 1850, into a flourishing home from home market, selling green bananas, yams, mangoes, paw-paws and sweet potatoes. Jamaicans were predominant amongst the many blacks that settled in Brixton at this time. This is reflected today in the area's association with reggae and Rastafarianism.

As the area continued to decline the middle class residents of Brixton began to move out to the newer suburbs on London's fringes. Most of the Jewish community moved out. Many shops and businesses shut. In 1961 Brixton's shopping centre ranked 3rd in terms of the number of retailers with branches there, and by 1984 had slipped to 37th (out of 56). Brixton's prosperity appeared to be over.

### Recent history

Brixton has become known more recently for its left-wing politics, particularly because of Lambeth council's and Ken Livingstone's controversial policies. It has also been associated with right-wing leaders – primarily the previous Prime Minister, John Major, who grew up there and later served on the council.

Concern about crime in the eighties led police to launch 'Swamp 81', a disastrous operation designed to counteract the high levels of street crime in Brixton. Large numbers of people, particularly black people, were stopped and searched. Tensions and resentment rose. Two ambiguous incidents, where the police appeared to be hassling black men, caused these tensions to erupt. What followed is now inscribed into national and international images of Brixton. For three days Brixton was overtaken by trouble, baton charges, missiles thrown at the police, arrests, violence, property damage, and looting by white and black youths. According to the Scarman Report, "the riots were essentially an outburst of anger and resentment by young black people against the police" (Scarman, 1982) and racial discrimination, high black unemployment and poverty were contributory factors.

In 1985 and 1995 there were more 'riots'. In 1985, after a police raid and the shooting of a Brixton resident by the police, an angry demonstration against the police turned into a riot. In 1995, after the arrest and death in custody of another Brixton resident, community groups organised another political protest. Again, this event led to violence and looting. This was labelled another 'riot'. I discuss this in Appendix V.

While no one forgets these riots, Brixton is now hailed as a popular and trendy place in which to socialise. As the *Mail on Sunday* said over ten years ago "Brixton has a name as a savage and brutal place, but to some it's fast becoming the smartest address in London" (*Mail on Sunday*, 10/5/1987, p.16). While this may be something of an

exaggeration, housing prices are now amongst the highest in South London (rising by 22% between 1997 and 1998), and there are ever more expensive restaurants and popular night clubs attracting more and more newcomers to the area. However, these changes are not reflected in Lambeth's social statistics. As I explained the main body of the thesis, there are no statistics exclusively on Brixton. It is worth looking at those from the wider area of Lambeth, however.

### Social statistics

Lambeth ranks as the 12<sup>th</sup> most severely deprived out of 354 local authority districts in England (DETR Index of Local Deprivation, April 1998). Lambeth has more young children entitled to free meals than any other borough (Education in London, 1997). Life expectancy at birth is three years lower in Brixton for men and one year lower for women compared to statistics for England and Wales (Population Advice Note, 1997). Housing is still in short supply, with 10,263 people on housing waiting lists in April 1997 (London Housing Statistics, 1997). What housing there is often in poor condition. Unemployment is high, with 24.9% of Lambeth's residents on Income Support (Social Care in London, 1996). Disproportionate numbers of the unemployed are black youth. The table below supports this. It shows the percentage of people unemployed by ethnic group. For example, 29.7% of the 'Other Black' category is unemployed. This would include many black Britons like some of the children in my study. (Source: London Research Centre: 1991 Census Data for London, 1993.)

<b>UNEMPLOYMENT BY ETHNIC GROUP</b>	
White	14.1%
Born in Ireland	19.3%
Caribbean	25.4%
African	28.7%
Other Black	29.7%
Indian	14.5%
Pakistani	21.9%
Bangladeshi	30.0%
Others	24.6%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17.1%</b>

As is often the case in areas of high unemployment, Lambeth has a high crime rate, the 5<sup>th</sup> highest in London, according to the Metropolitan Police. It has either the highest or second highest levels of crime for certain crimes (burglary, sex crime, robbery and violent crime). Most victims of crime are aged between 20 and 50, and are black and male (Crime and Disorder Review, 1998). Many young black people, this Review recognises, are victims of racial abuse and violence. Most offenders, for certain types of crimes, are men, aged between 15 and 34. In the 15 to 19 age group in particular, young black men are over-represented compared to Lambeth's population profile (*ibid*).

It is difficult to assess the ethnic diversity of Lambeth, as people have different ways of categorising themselves and others. Here is a selection of statistics. The overwhelming proportion of Lambeth's older population (those above 60 years) is white - 87.9% (London Research Centre, 1991 census). Of the total population, 81% are European by birth (73% being born in Britain). The remaining 19% were born outside the European community (5% in the Caribbean, 4% in Africa, nearly 3% in Asia). There are more Black Caribbeans (12.6%) and Black Africans (6.5%) living in Lambeth who were born in Britain but identify themselves as Caribbean or African. The statistics for school children show how the ethnic diversity of Brixton is changing: 27.4% are English, Scottish or Welsh, 22.7% Caribbean, 19.2% African, 10.7% 'Other Black' and 5.9% 'Other White' (Lambeth Education Statistics 1997-98). Therefore over 50% of school children in Lambeth could be described as black. This was more or less reflected in the schools I researched. Here are the statistics for school1 and school2. Due to administrative problems at school3 these were unobtainable for this school. However, SH3 assured me that they would be much the same those for schools 1 and 2.

	SCHOOL 1	SCHOOL2
White – UK heritage	15.8	21.0
White European	0	4.6
Black Caribbean	33.6	26.9
Black African	24.4	22.6
Black Other	19.9	11.3
Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi	3.9	3.5
Chinese	0.9	2.0
Other ethnic minorities	1.5	8.1

The young in Brixton are particularly affected by two forms of social and economic disadvantage. The first is lack of jobs. The second, for some, is discrimination on racial grounds. This leads to resentment and alienation. The middle classes – whites and Buppies (black upwardly mobile) - continue to move out of the area. Some older residents have moved back to the Caribbean. Students, yuppies, and ‘arty types’ have moved into the area. This goes hand-in-hand with the very uneven gentrification of Brixton.

For many Brixton remains a place to visit. There are over 19 million people who go through Brixton tube each year (25,000 passengers go through Brixton Underground Station a day). Many of these come to dance, to shop, to eat, to listen to music, to work, to learn about their heritage, to visit people. Many who live here do so for a short time. It is those who are from Brixton, who live here on a permanent basis, who consider it their home and who ‘live’ Brixton who live the realities of the histories and statistics I have presented here. It is these that I write about here in this thesis.



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  - Lambeth Education Statistics, 1997-8
  - Population Advice Note, 1997
  - Education in London, 1997
  - London Housing Statistics, 1997
  - Social Care in London, 1996
  - London's Older People, 1996
  - Unemployment in London, 1995
  - 1991 Census Data for London
- Schools' own records

### APPENDIX III

## Reflections on Earlier Research: the 1995 Brixton 'Riot'

In this appendix I reflect on my earlier research in Brixton. For a Master's dissertation in Social Psychology I completed a study of narratives of the 1995 Brixton 'riot' (Howarth, 1996). I have referred to this study many times in the main body of the PhD thesis. As I write this, at the end of 1999, the riot is still salient in the social construction of Brixton, and people are still angry about how the media reported the event. This means that a theme connects both my research projects in Brixton. This is not the only reason I have included this appendix. The study explains how the very research questions of the PhD were born. It also explains my developing relationship with the area. Hence, the PhD thesis would be somewhat incomplete without some reflection on the Master's research. (For more information on the project, explanations of the theories and methods used, as well as details of findings, see Howarth (1996) - the Master's thesis itself, available from the Department of Social Psychology, London School of Economics, or from the author.)

In the Master's some of the crucial questions for the PhD emerged, although I did not wholly understand their significance at the time. I was aware that there were interesting questions to ask here in terms of community and identity, but did not know how to begin. The Master's, therefore, remained focused on its initial research topic: social representations of crowds. However, with the benefit of hindsight, I can now see how my interest in the social psychology of community emerged from this earlier work. In order to draw out the connections between these two research projects I need first to describe 'the riot' of 13<sup>th</sup> December 1995. It is necessary, of course, to place this in an historical context. As I was interested in participant-observers' understanding of the 'riot', *their* understanding of its context is crucial. I interviewed people who had been involved with the 'riot' (as observers, as participants, as victims of looting, as police officers, as journalists, as organisers, for example). They gave me their version of the event. I wove these versions together, sieved out differences, and so produced what I called a 'meta-narrative' account. This is an extract from the Master's thesis.

Brixton is an area of South London with a history of riots (one in 1981, and one in 1985) and a reputation of crime, drug trading, and political discontent. As the people of Brixton, in the main, do not share this representation, they are "united against the enemy" (the enemy "being the reputation" as a restaurant manager put it). Because Brixton is treated as different to the rest of London it becomes "a special community" with concerns distinct to those from the rest of the capital. Although Brixton is one of the most deprived areas in London, and unemployment, benefit claimant, crime, and truancy statistics are high, many in the community believe that much has improved and that the "problems of the 80s" are a thing of the past.

Because the police stop and question a disproportionate number of black people on the streets of Brixton (as the Police Commissioner admitted at a public meeting, 2/4/96), and because there has been a disproportionate number of black deaths in police custody (52 black and 3 white in the last decade, some of them being from the Brixton area, Brian Douglas Campaign), resentment towards the police is shared by many in the community. The news that there had been another 'black death' in the early hours of 5/12/95 in police custody could only, in this context, add to the resentment felt. Despite the statements from the police that the man involved (Wayne Douglas, a Brixton resident) had died naturally, there was widespread belief in the community, fuelled by one newspaper report (The Voice, 12/12/96) that Douglas died from injuries sustained from police batons.

In an attempt to draw attention to their concerns members of the community, Douglas' relatives and campaign groups organised (and obtained police permission for) a protest which took place on 13/12/95 at 6:30pm, outside the police station in central Brixton. About 150 people turned up, and were monitored by 12 visible police officers. Several speeches were made by representatives of campaign groups and Douglas' sister.

At 7:30pm the protest organisers announced that, despite police objections, the crowd would march slowly down the main road in Brixton to the Town Hall, then return. The police attempted to prevent this, but succeeded only in shadowing the crowd to The Ritzy cinema. Here the police surrounded the crowd, and so blocked their return. At this stage there was "basically a stand-off" (councillor). The organisers tried to negotiate with the police and the crowd who appeared "quite angry" (journalist).

At 8:30pm, after some trouble between a few individuals and the police, "there was heavy police, on horseback, and police with shields" (journalist). The crowd had become very agitated and "the organisers lost control" (brother). According to the police officer "at this point people started getting confrontational with the police", who then "attempted to disperse the crowd by moving forward in a line" (councillor). In an attempt to clear the road there was a police charge (journalist).

This had the effect of driving people away from the Town Hall, down other main roads, and some of them then began to damage property, and loot shops. At 9:25pm a 7-Eleven store was set on fire. At the same time there was an air of normality, with "people standing at the bus-stop, trying to get home" (journalist). After more shops and other premises had been damaged, at about 10:00pm a "copper got knocked off his bike and beaten up" (journalist). This changed the mood, "tensions were really running" (bartender). "Cars overturned, set on fire, shops being looted, petrol station smashed up" (bystander). The Community Police Consultative Group Offices and The DogStar pub were set on fire.

Trojan units (specialist firearms police officers) were called in and the police switch-board jammed with calls reporting crimes (police officer). There was another baton charge as the police moved everyone back up the road to the Town Hall and up another main road. This succeeded in dispersing the crowd, and the majority left the scene. By 2:30 am all was quiet.

Before collecting these stories I was more or less an outsider to Brixton. In the first three months of my time in London I would go there occasionally to look for the familiar tropical fruit and vegetables that I grew up with, and to meet friends in one of the trendy cafés or pubs. I liked the general ‘buzz’ of the place, the fact that there was a real mixture of people, of cultures, and of dress. I was thrilled to discover smells and tastes that I recognised from my childhood in Kenya, Fiji and Papua New Guinea. To share this excitement I filled shopping bags with yams, cassava and breadfruit to take to my mother in the Cotswolds and my sister in Yorkshire. I discovered the Black Cultural Archives and shops where I could browse and find books, prints and cloth that reminded me of teaching in South Africa at the time of Nelson Mandela’s release. With my memories of growing up in Africa and the Pacific, I felt much more at home here than I had in other parts of England.

Early on the morning of 14<sup>th</sup> December my college friends and I were shocked to read “Black anger erupts again on streets”, as the Daily Telegraph described the events of 13<sup>th</sup> December. We bought a selection of quality and tabloid newspapers and compared the discourses used. What shocked us was not so much that a relatively small so-called ‘riot’ had occurred, as there were few injuries and only minor damage, but what was shocking was the way most articles rooted descriptions in explicit or implicit racist images. We had all recently read *Mapping the language of racism: discourse and the legitimisation of exploitation* by Wetherell and Potter (1992), and were impressed by it. It had made us more aware of the ideological manipulation of different discourses. I can remember the lively conversation we had and the rich ideas that flowed. This was the first of many such conversations, as I became fascinated by the media portrayal of the event over the next days and in the reactions to this from community groups in Brixton.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the seeds of my Master’s project were sown. I read and kept all news articles on the event and ran a series of one-to-one interviews and a focus group on how people who lived and/or worked in the area constructed the ‘riot’. I talked to teenagers who had been involved, people whose shops were looted, police officers, councillors, journalists,

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to these friends, especially Caroline Screen and Claire Mallet, for their support and criticism.

a teacher, a lawyer, a youth worker and the brother of a victim of suspected police brutality. I spent a lot of time in the area, walking around finding new streets, watching the general hustle and bustle of Brixton. Parts of it I liked, parts of it fascinated me, parts of it intimidated me.

People reacted differently to me. Some were highly suspicious of my intentions, perhaps thinking that I might be a police informer. Some were enthusiastic in retelling their version of the riot/protest. Some were polite and descriptive but unemotional about the surrounding controversy. Some horrified me with extremely racist descriptions of people in Brixton. One moved me to tears with the story of his brother's death in police custody. Through these I became very aware of the importance of trust and respect in an interview situation. I also realised the difficulty that some people in Brixton have in asserting their version of events, or, more precisely, the difficulty they have in having this version listened to. The negative representation of Brixton in wider society was cited again and again with much anger. The police and the media were repeatedly blamed for exaggerating levels of crime and violence.

In the interviews and focus group I asked people to tell me 'what happened on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December'. For some it was a night of spontaneous, irrational, opportunistic violence and looting; for others it was a political demonstration against the murder of a member of the community by racist police. Two dominant representations emerged: (a) crowds as a collection of irrational, criminal and black individuals and (b) crowds united by a common history asserting their democratic rights. There are clear links between these representations and the representation of Brixton as Bad: as black, criminal, rough and aggressive. Take this extract from the Master's thesis where I describe the representation of the crowd as criminal:

Particularly salient in many accounts is the criminalisation of the crowd. The police officer, for instance, said that the most important factor behind the riot was the "existence of a criminal population". Brixton contains many "habitual criminals", in his view, and is therefore "fertile for riots". Another narrative repeatedly cited was "those in the black community that would be more, um, amenable to rioting" (journalist). Some accounts equated criminality with irrationality, describing those in the crowd as "mindless criminals" (bystander). For some the actions of the crowd are so random, so illogical, that they refuse to consider explanation of the event (e.g. councillor). Associations were also made with violent behaviour and skin-colour (e.g. journalist).

Also in the data there were many references to “the community feeling” (teacher) and “the community response” (lawyer). The representation of the crowd as a collection of people guided by a social history rode on the social representation of Brixton as a proud, assertive and diverse community. People spoke of unity against the police, the concern people feel for each other, and a sense of community. In analysing this material I began to see the link between what is said, who is saying it and why. In other words, I began to develop an understanding of the links between representation, identity and ideology.

This became particularly clear in the focus group with four black teenagers. This was the most difficult but also the most rewarding interview. For reasons that I did not fully understand at the time, an extremely confrontational situation arose after I had finished the focus group. The boys accused me of racism and exploitation. I found this very upsetting, as I recognised that there may be some truth in what they said. The experience almost caused me to give up the research altogether. After considerable reflection, however, I realised that this focus group had taught me more about the dialectics of self-identity and social representations than had any theory or other study. The power of others to construct the identities of the stigmatised, the destructive nature of the gaze of the other, the consequences of skin-colour in self-other relations, and my guilt as a liberal white had all become very real for me. These are the realities that motivate my ongoing research.

Children had told me that I had no right to speak for them, as black children. I struggled with this. My appreciation for anti-essentialist theories, particularly feminist (e.g. Fuss, 1990 and Butler, 1989), cautioned me against accepting these accusations. My appreciation for difference and the right to claim difference cautioned me against rejecting them. My concern for the well being of the young, however, guided my struggle to understand and overcome this difficult issue. My concern, particularly for the oppressed young, was born, I think, in the classrooms of South Africa. Here I attempted to share my own privileged education with poor, young, black and ‘Coloured’ children. They, in turn, taught me about life. They taught me about the difficulties of living in apartheid, of being stigmatised as sub-human, of the insecurities of violence and

hostility. They also taught me of dignity in the face of stigma, of childish playfulness under the threat of violence, and of psychological strength under the weight of racism.

These experiences, and others, fuel my research. The colour of my skin and my heritage will continue to shape the research that I do. As I have stressed in the PhD thesis, these are not methodological problems. They are the fabric of day-to-day life in today's multicultural societies. The misunderstanding, the anger, the pain, and the guilt that one's positioning brings forth are the substance of contemporary self-other relationships. In beginning to understand this I realised that the distrust and hostility that these four teenagers displayed should not be a barrier to my research. In fact, the event revealed the very heart of problem: the power of the gaze of the other.<sup>1</sup>

Hence it was in the course of the Master's research that I realised that social representations can have profound consequences on the self-identities of those living in Brixton. Although I did not understand the complexities of *living community* as clearly as I hope I now do, I felt that there was something extremely interesting happening in relation to identity, representation and community. Once the Master's thesis was complete, I was given the opportunity and the support to tackle the difficult question of 'community': how we construct it, how we claim it, how we contest it. Thus, from Master's to PhD, from riots to community, from distrust to support, the questions that guide my current research have matured. My PhD research has not answered these questions; it has taught me what questions to ask, how to ask them, and how to listen for them.

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Dr Marie-Claude Gervais for helping me in realising this. Her continued support throughout the thesis has been invaluable.

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