Overpolicing of Black Youth in Streets

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Society is based on material and discursive geographies that shape individuals' experiences and perceptions. From a social geography perspective, society and geography are mutually constituted and simultaneously (re)produced: they are fluid and filled with meanings. Here, intersecting social categories (e.g., race, class, age, gender, ability) and personal expectations create inequalities and systems of oppression that are reinforced/undermined by institutions, media, geographies, discourses, and interactions. Unfortunately, places are constantly being (re)written in ways that exclude/privilege certain individuals, which reinforce/devalue dichotomies and racialized meanings of society. It is clear racism and other systems of oppression disproportionately affect some groups; the paper will highlight the specific challenges black youth face due to their identities. The present research aims to analyze the overpolicing of Black youth in streets to highlight institutionalized racism in Canada.

Understanding Intersectionality and Identities

Identities are fluid and performative aspects of human beings that are influenced by geographies, social relations, social labels, among others. These are multifaceted constructs that shape our life experiences and perceptions. Feminist and Black theorists identify an ingrained and fixed whiteness in society -whiteness being a taken for granted category. Consistent with this idea, Panelli (2004) points out the way race is used to privilege certain individuals and (re)produce power relations. As a social construct, race positions certain bodies in clear disadvantage within the framework of a presumed naturalness of bodies (i.e., essentialism). Concepts like "superior races" and "healthy bodies" are thus legitimized, (re)produced as "truths", and uncontested. In the case of Black bodies, there is an assumed violence, danger, and hypersexuality that is presumed natural to them within mainstream culture (Anderson, 2015; Maynard, 2020) . In this way, the overpolicing of Black bodies (and

many others) is thus justified through said “truths". However, it is worth considering the changeability of said constructs: they are constantly being (re)shaped via interactions, discourses, institutions, geographies, among others. Power relations hence, privilege and neglect identities for political purposes that result in bodies’ exclusion from specific settings (Panelli, 2004).

Having a similar argument, Valentine (2007) points out the need to understand individuals’ experiences as unique processes that involve overlapping social labels that shape their life (i.e., intersectionality). Consistent with Panelli’s work (2004), the author highlights the way how multiple labels intersect to create identities that emerge or are overshadowed in different contexts. We cannot separate different dimensions of social life, thus we should analyze how labels combine to create subjective experiences. On the other hand, we should consider the fluidity and performativity of identity within specific settings. Therefore, we need to address social injustices by analyzing the intersection of multiple labels and modes of oppression: this way, we can really understand lived realities.

Geographies of Black Youth: Intersectionality and Place

Black youth’s intersecting identities as “Black” and as a “youth” set them up against the mainstream. Referring to the previous paragraph, the mainstream is the concept of “normal”, usually meaning a white heteronormative space. Anderson’s (2015) article demonstrates the search for belonging that transpires from the liminality of youth: in a world where adults have authority over children, youth fall into a liminal category where they are neither fully an adult nor a small child. As stated by Anderson (2015), “youth’s ambiguity in relation to this child/adult (b)ordering mechanism thus leads to problems for their sense of place within mainstream culture”. The ambiguity mentioned here forms the pressure of being expected to act like adults, all the while being supervised and given limited freedom as a child. As well, youth can also be seen as angels or little devils (Anderson, 2015) because their

position in the adult/child binary is unspecified, leading to conflicting expectations. The liminal nature of youth thus creates unrealistic expectations for them who are then marginalized by society as "troublesome", which leads to a mainstream culture where youth feel they don't belong. Anderson (2015) shares a clear result of youth liminality: "youth thus have liminal status, and although this means they have no place made for them by the mainstream it does not mean they have no place at all. . .[youth] take their culture to the 'street'" in order to find a place to belong.

However, the addition of race further complicates youth identity and the way they are viewed. While youth identity is associated with "trouble" and Black identity is associated with both "trouble" and "danger", a conjunction of "Black" and "youth" identities creates another level of assumed trouble and danger. Some identities can overshadow others, such as in Valentine's (2007) article where the lived experiences of Jeanette explained the emerging, erasure, and overshadowing of her deaf, woman, class, and wife identities. For Black youth, the assumed danger connected to a Black identity overshadows the child/angel aspect of a youth label (see Anderson, 2015; Maynard, 2020). This emphasizes an assumed danger and trouble from those with a Black youth identity, leading to hypersurveillance in the form of overpolicing in streets.

Another aspect to Black youth identity is the performativity of identity. According to Panelli (2004), identity is expressed through performativity, and May (2015, p.413) notes the steady presence of performed masculinity through greetings and fist bumps that feigned "being aloof, in control and dominant". This performance of masculinity is an aspect of the street culture created by Black youth. However, the volatility of performed masculinity changes depending on the environment. May's (2015) research on male black youth who are (or were) homeless examines the "vibrating whiteness" of downtown Toronto compared to the racial "vibe" of Toronto's suburbs; overall, the segregation of the two "vibes" reveal a

racially charged barrier between Black folk and white folk in different areas of the same city. May (2015) also found that each place was relatively peaceful (or predictable) on its own, but when Black youth went to downtown Toronto (a place of white vibes), the mix of racial and white vibes produced a space for racially charged altercations wherein fights were initiated over seemingly nothing. In one of May's (2015) interviews, the Black youth was surprised at the other's sudden aggression and was made to fight back. When comparing the relatively peaceful masculine performativity in places with racial vibes to the violent masculine performativity in places with mixed vibes, the research suggests that there is more violence towards and, in turn, from Black youth in spaces of mixed races. As such, Black youths' peaceful performed masculinity can be seen as a product of youth street culture that was produced in response to a wish to belong somewhere, while violent performed masculinity is sometimes caused by the necessity for Black youth to defend themselves. Thus, the connection of Black youth identity to violent performed masculinities is (at least) partially caused by society's failure to address racism.

Private Space vs Public Space

As previously argued, geographies are filled with meanings and therefore reflect the underlying values of society (e.g., social relations, material borders). In their work, Mitchell (1995) highlights a dichotomy in terms of public vs private space. Here, boundaries (re)produce social relations and disproportionately excludes certain individuals. Public space is usually regarded as accessible, inclusive, and neutral: ironically it is also a masculinized environment of professionalism, order, and production. In this way, there is a clear division of who gets to belong and who does not. In terms of private space, Mitchell (1995) argues we have the right and ability to exclude access given the "fact" it is a feminized place limited to reproduction and caregiving. As evidenced, dominant discourse about public/private space is used to justify the exclusion, regulation, and overpolicing of specific groups.

Similarly, a key idea we need to understand is the formation of neoliberal individuals within a society. Here, radical individualism and privatization of public spaces is enhanced to foster geographies' control (for "safety" purposes) and (re)produce the construct of a "legitimate citizen": a person who is critical, productive, self-sufficient, and a consumer with an active role in society. Therefore, only people who get to belong in public spaces are those with neoliberal characteristics. This notion is rather problematic because it is based on a us/them dichotomy in which fear is used to justify the "cleansing" of streets. In the case of Black bodies, they are commonly viewed as morally corrupt and a "threat" to social order. Based on this idea, we should consider the way constructs shape how we occupy space.

In fact, racism has pervaded into public spaces to the point it has become a part of the institutions that regulate the public spaces. For example, Meng (2017) brings up the police's proactive policing strategies- specifically, their use of 208 cards; these cards are written to record persons of interest, but at the police's discretion. That means the police have the power to choose who they stop, and who to write a 208 card for. Meng (2017) and Wortley (2019) both argue that 208 cards are subject to police bias and cause unnecessary stress for Black folk and other marginalized groups. This bias is especially apparent when it is taken into consideration that "80% of black youth between the ages of 15 and 24 have been stopped by police for purposes of "general investigation" during the year of 2008 and 2013" (Meng, 2017, p.6). Meng's (2017) article also writes that comments defending this issue argue the percentage of Black youth stopped is high because they are more likely to cause trouble due to their age, but this reveals the stigma people have towards "troublesome" youth, which is further compounded when race is added and results in this normalized suspicion towards Black youth. Institutionalized racism is a system of oppression targeting marginalized groups, which needs to be dismantled before any real egalitarian processes can be carried out.

Examining Black Youth Discrimination and Overpolicing

The overpolicing of Black youth is apparent. Meng (2017, p.8) provides alarming statistics: “black youth are 2.5 times more likely to be stopped than white youth, three times more likely to be charged with a driving offence, three times more likely to be held in jail rather than released.” These discriminatory practices clearly reveal the institutionalized racism in policing. However, we must also consider that these statistics do not include unreported instances, so there may be even higher rates of racialized policing. More importantly, we need to go beyond percentages and understand racism as a lived experience within a specific framework -being subjective to each individual.

Having a similar argument, Madut (2019) and Patterson (2004) contend the long-term marginalization of Black bodies in Canada. Madut (2019) argues that the discrimination of African-Americans can be identified all the way back to 1867 with the limitation of African immigration by Canadian laws. As evidenced, racism is very ingrained in our systems to the point of transgressing into policing regulations, curriculum, laws, and state action/inaction.

Conclusion

Overall, this research found that (male) Black youth experience racialized prejudices in the streets and are thus overpoliced in response. Research on female Black youth experiences are not yet prevalent in the academic research domain; further research on this topic is needed. It is important looking into long-term structural inequalities/constructs to really understand how and why racism is normalized (even to the present day). To combat racism thus, we must identify/transform institutional practices and constructs that privilege certain individuals at the expense of others.

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