Identity and belonging: The experience of the Windrush Generation and their children

Jacqueline Sewell*

Abstract

In this article the concepts of identity and belonging will be examined as they relate tothe experiences of the black diaspora of Caribbean Jamaican heritage in the UK; those from the Windrush Generation and their children. The article will examine black identity from an existential perspective drawing upon the work of Sartre and Fanon. There will also be consideration of the work of the sociologist Stuart Hall and his ideas on cultural identity, with its existential themes that see identity as always 'becoming' and always in context. All these ideas illustrate the debate between whether a black identity is a thing that can be acquired or if individuals who are black develop a sense of self through their relationship with their blackness and their subjective lived experience. The article also considers whether through their experiences, those of Jamaican heritage have been able to construct a relationship with their blackness in a way that enables them to no longer consider themselves (and be perceived) as 'the other'.

Keywords: *black identity, cultural identity, belonging, Caribbean diaspora, existential*

Peer reviewed article submitted [30/10/18], accepted [6/12/18]

Introduction

When the Windrush Scandal became front-page news in the UK during the spring of 2018, I was at the final stages of my doctoral research on the experiences of the children of the Windrush Generation, the term used to describe the individuals who came to the UK from the Caribbean between 1948 and 1962. Notwithstanding the specific issues facing a number of people of Caribbean heritage who suddenly found that their British citizenship was in question, the Windrush Scandal also brought to the surface the long standing issue of race and the complex relationship between the black diaspora, their identity, their place in the world and where they belong.

There is debate about whether the term 'black' should be capitalised as 'Black' to denote a political descriptor that goes beyond race. In this article, I use 'black', 'black identity' and 'blackness' interchangeably. For me, capitalising Black suggests a single identity to be acquired by black people; whereas in this article, I will argue that black identity is more complex and is different even among people descended from slavery. In the case of Jamaicans, for example, black identity appears to be inextricably linked to a Jamaican cultural identity.

An Existential Perspective on Black Identity

There are arguably two broad perspectives within the tradition of existential thinking on black identity. One perspective appears to position black identity as something to be acquired in order to counter anti-black racism and restore value to the black subject. The work of Aime Cesaire (1913–2008) illustrates this perspective.

Cesaire was a Martinican poet, closely associated with developing the concept of *Negritude* (a term from the French that means the process of becoming *black* in a white world). Cesaire (1935) saw this process as a way in which people of African descent could reject colonial identity and acquire their own Pan African identity. Sartre (1964), evoking the ideas of Cesaire, argued that *because* of slavery and colonialism it is important for black people to assert their blackness. Indeed, he states that black people are oppressed because they are black, so it is important for them to 'become black' and to assert a pride in their 'race'. There is, therefore, a need for black people to acquire 'blackness-for-itself', to develop a black consciousness, and *think* of themselves as black. However, Sartre (1964) also argues that this 'blackness' should not be seen as a fixed all-encompassing object that *wholly* defines the individual who is black, i.e. being black should not become 'blackness-in-itself'.

Fanon (1925–1961), a student of Cesaire, adopts a different position than his mentor and Sartre. Fanon argues that the experience of racism has had a profound effect on the *relationship* that black people have with their blackness. Also, the sense that white society see black people as all the same means that they are not viewed as individuals: *'I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonized native, robs me of all worth and individuality'* (Fanon, 1986, p. 98). Fanon further argues that even when black people become educated and aspire to the things that white people have deemed valuable, they are still cast as inferior, as other because they are not white. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986, [1952]), Fanon argued that Sartre's conception of Negritude was to *'seek the source of the source [black identity]'* (Fanon, 1986, p. 134) and in doing so appeared to position black consciousness as pre-existing, a thing to be acquired. However, Fanon argues that black people wish to assert themselves as black, not through a pre-existing notion of an authentic blackness or as an inferior being but as an individual.

Black identity and the Jamaican Diaspora

This history of identity and belonging among the Jamaican diaspora can be traced back to the Atlantic slave trade. The brutality of this trade stripped the ancestors of Windrush of their cultural identity, dehumanising and positioning their existence as inferior to white existence. In order to ensure full control of their former slave territories, the British colonialists imposed their culture upon the inhabitants, making them British citizens as part of the British Empire. So these same citizens who arrived in the UK as part of the Windrush Generation were not prepared for the hostility, racism and rejection they subsequently experienced. However, their early experiences in the UK and that of their children born in Britain thereafter, coincided with a period of social history (1960s and 1970s) in Britain and the United States characterised by bitter struggles for black equal rights and the drive for a positive construction of blackness.

It can be argued that the notion of a 'black identity' has similarities *and* differences among the descendants of slavery. In America, the 1960s and 1970s saw a repositioning of blackness as a positive thing. The focus appears to have been on 'acquiring' a black identity that also appeared to carry with it an overtly political meaning. In Jamaica, it appears that there was also a similar reconstruction of blackness positively and while this could arguably also be seen as political; this reconstruction was closely related to the emerging cultural identity of 'Jamaican-ness'. This black cultural identity in Jamaica appears to have been expressed and engaged with through Rastafarianism and reggae music, in particular 'roots reggae' music. Both the symbols of Rastafarianism and reggae music referenced Jamaicans' historical connection to Africa and their evolving Jamaican identity following independence in 1962 (Hall, 1994).

These changes in Jamaica impacted on the whole of the Jamaican diaspora (Hall, 1994). As a result, the Windrush Generation and their children now had an opportunity to develop a sense of self as black people in a different way than previous generations. However, how would this sense of self develop as a result of their *experience*s in Britain?

The Windrush Generation 'become black'.

The eminent Jamaican born sociologist Stuart Hall's (1994) essay 'Cultural identity and diaspora', focuses on cultural identity as it relates to the African Caribbean diaspora in general and Jamaicans in particular; and his work draws upon existential themes of fluidity, context, and the ever-changing nature of identity.

Hall argues that the collective experience of the 'expropriation of cultural identity' through slavery and colonialism leads black people to experience themselves as 'the other'; with no identity and inferior to white people (Hall, 1996). Fanon observed that this lack of a cultural identity has the potential if not challenged to lead to self-hatred and for black people to see their value only by reference to white validation (Fanon, 1986). However, the 1970s saw the rise of the civil rights and black power movements in the United States and Rastafarianism in Jamaica; and these were, Hall argues, an attempt to rediscover a lost African history. In Jamaica, during this period Hall notes: *'the culture of Rastafarianism and the music of reggae – the metaphors, the figures or signifiers of a new construction of Jamaican-ness [emerged]'* (Hall, 1994, p. 231). Hall sees this period of the 1970s as historic as he argues that for the first time, Jamaicans in Jamaica and overseas *'discovered themselves to be black'* (Hall, 1994, p. 231). In doing so they constructed a cultural identity of Jamaican-ness grounded in an Africa of the past but also reconfigured in the Jamaica of the present.

During my adolescence in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I can specifically remember a significant shift in my sense of self and which I at the time described as becoming 'conscious' or becoming black. This way of seeing myself was different from the way I saw myself in my formative years and was influenced by the historical period and characterised by mantras such as 'black is beautiful' and 'young, gifted and black'. For me, this shift in my sense of self was underpinned by a conscious decision to read more about black history and literature and immerse myself in Jamaican culture and politics and roots reggae music. At the time, it did seem as if there was a sense that you were either 'conscious' or not; this assumed that there was one way to be black. However, as I look back on my experience, I recognise that Fanon's thesis also resonates not just with me, but also with most of my research participants. From my experience and research, some second generation black women of Jamaican heritage (of which I am one) experienced a time back in the 1970s and 1980s when their relationship with their blackness shifted. This new emerging sense of self was in contrast to their prior negative experiences and relationship with being black. This period was characterised by ideas about blackness that had their roots in Cesaire and pointed to a political type of rediscovered single black African identity. However, it was also influenced by an emerging cultural identity. For the Jamaican diaspora becoming black appeared to go hand in hand with an emerging Jamaican cultural identity.

While Hall (1994) recognises the importance of a collective sense of identity among the Jamaican diaspora, he argues that history itself is not static and that there is not one point in time from which we can say there was the essence of an authentic black identity to be acquired. Instead, slavery and colonialism should be seen as a frame for black identities. There appears to be continuity with the past but there are significant differences as the culture evolves and people of Jamaican heritage have different experiences.

The experience of Jamaicans of the Windrush Generation is arguably one of these significant shifts. Their experiences in the UK would shape their sense of cultural identity in a way that would be different from their relatives back in Jamaica. In turn their children born in the UK would have a different sense of self. This illustrates Hall's belief that identities constantly transform in relation to experiences and historical space and time. That is, identity does not reveal the essence of an individual but rather the position that they adopt or are prescribed within a particular cultural narrative, in this case the narrative around black cultural identity and belonging (Hall, 1994). However, to what extent would the differences in experience between the generations manifest themselves? How would both generations experience their blackness and their sense of being 'other'?

Current research

In 2015, I began a piece of qualitative research from an existential-phenomenological perspective, as part of a doctorate in Counselling Psychology. The research is into the lived experience of six professional black women of Jamaican heritage, born in the UK, to parents who were part of the Windrush Generation. The aim is to capture the stories of these women who have carved out successful careers for themselves. I was particularly interested in how, through their narratives, they made sense of the experiences they encountered over a life that coincided with some significant social and political events in British and world history during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, their formative years.

The research was undertaken using critical narrative analysis which draws upon narrative analysis and critical psychological and post-modernist theories about power relations between social groups. The concept of the 'self' within critical theory sees identity '*constructed, negotiated and defended in relation to other people and in the light of prevailing values and conventions'* (Gough & Mcfadden, 2001, p.74). As individuals construct their sense of self they tell stories or narratives to describe their world and their relationship to it. These narratives are constructed from prevailing societal narratives (culturally and historically situated). When individuals construct their personal narrative, they draw upon the prevailing societal narratives (about self and others) and adopt a position within these narratives as they construct their stories about their sense of self and others that they relate to (Gough & Mcfadden, 2001). In order to access the individual narratives of my participants, to understand how they see themselves and others, I used a six-stage model of critical narrative analysis developed by Darren Langdridge (2007). Below is the story of one of my participants, whom I have called Rachel.

The Story of Rachel

The story of Rachel illustrates the experience of a child of the Windrush Generation. In her story we see how she experiences her parents' relationship with their identity and sense of belonging and how her experiences shape her relationship with her sense of self.

Rachel is a professional working in an executive leadership position within the corporate sector. She was born in the UK to Jamaican parents who arrived in the UK in the 1950s. During her early life, she became aware of her parents' sadness and disappointment with their lives in the UK. Rachel described her parents' experience of rejection and discrimination and noticed that their reaction was to keep their heads down and work hard. They encouraged her to work hard too and to aspire to a professional career.

Rachel feels differently to her parents, having grown up in the 1970s and 1980s. She feels more emboldened than she feels her parents were when faced with discrimination. Rachel talked about devouring black culture; from black literature to the ideas of Rastafarianism and becoming 'political' during the 1970s and 1980s. In contrast, she referred to how her parents were fearful of the civil rights and black power movements. However, when Rachel narrated her story across her lifetime, it became clear that she had, and to some extent still has, a complex relationship with her sense of belonging.

Rachel described her earliest experiences at school during the 1970s as the first time when she felt that she was being judged as not good enough because she was black. Despite doing well at school, she along with all the other black girls in the school was not encouraged to go to university. In fact it was her parents who encouraged her to work hard and aspire to further her education.

With regard to what being black meant to her, Rachel talked about only really seeing herself as 'black' and coming to see this as being an important part of her identity when she started university in the early 1980s. At university she noticed being different because the university was predominantly white. She recalled seeking out other black people and when she found them in the African-Caribbean society and in the local community, she felt a sense of belonging. She talked about her parents not really 'being out there' with their blackness. However, rather than keep her head down, she felt a growing determination to be 'black and proud'.

Rachel described her experience as a black woman in her profession as being one where she is often the 'first' or the 'only' black person. At the start of her career, she recalls feeling constantly judged, not on her own abilities, but as a 'representative' of all black people. She concedes that part of her reason for working hard and striving for perfection is that she feels she can't afford to mess up; if she

messes up then she fears that white people will feel it is because she is black. However, she reflects on what she describes as limiting herself in terms of the companies that she felt she could work for because she felt that they were not places for people like her. Rachel wonders if this is the experience of the current generation of black people as so few of them apply to firms like hers.

As she has progressed in her career and talks about her most recent experience, her narrative shifts. Rachel now talks about seeing her blackness as a bonus. She still is mostly 'the only one' or the 'first' but she feels these experiences give her a greater understanding of what it feels like to be different, to not belong, an experience that her white counterparts don't have. Although Rachel's narrative ends on an upbeat note, when she describes her pride in her Jamaican heritage and her accomplishments at work, she still feels a responsibility towards being a representative for all other black people; and she recognises that she will always be judged as such by white people.

Conclusion

The Windrush Scandal again raised for the black Caribbean diaspora the issue of identity and belonging that has its roots in slavery. It was also a reminder of the rejection and anti-black racism they had to endure as they sought to carve out a life in the UK. Social and political events in the 1970s offered those of the Jamaican diaspora the opportunity to construct their blackness in a positive light underpinned by a newly found Jamaican cultural identity. However, their experiences in the UK shaped their sense of self and how they responded to racism. For some the hope was that their children, born in the UK, might have a different experience and be accepted if they worked hard and achieved. However, as the story of Rachel illustrates, their children's experience was both similar and different to that of their parents. What is interesting in the case of Rachel is how she and her parents' different positions towards the events of the 1970s illustrate separate but co-existing positions towards their blackness. However, despite these apparent differences between Rachel's relationship to her sense of self and of belonging when compared to her parents, there are still things that endure. Rachel and her parents *experience* being different and judged as less than. Even when Rachel attempts to construct this difference in a positive way, it still appears to be in relation to her experiences of being judged by white people. Rachel and her parents feel called upon to react in some way to the judgement or positioning of them by white people. Her parents 'kept their heads down' in order to belong and Rachel 'keeps her head up and works hard'. They both do these different things but arguably for exactly the same reason.

What the Windrush Scandal and Rachel's story appear to reveal is that no matter what position black people take towards their blackness or how much they seek to achieve in terms of the values of white society, they are still *black*. It appears that their blackness continues to position them as 'the other'.

Jacqueline Sewell is a counselling psychologist in training and provide psychological support to individuals within a work context. Her work focuses on the lived experience of individuals; how it influences, and is influenced by, their relationship with work. She is currently completing a professional doctorate in counselling psychology (DCPsych) at NSPC/Middlesex University. Her doctoral research is focused on how the identity of second generation professional black British born women of Jamaican heritage has been shaped by their cultural heritage and experiences of growing up in the UK; and how these experiences have influenced their professional life.
*Jacquelinesewell@aol.com

References

Cesaire, A (1935) Retrieved from translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=fr&u=https://letudiant-noir.webs.com/&prev=search

Fanon, F (1986) *Black skin,* white masks. London: Pluto Classics.

Gough, B and Mcfadden, M (2001) *Critical social psychology.* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hall, S. (1994) Cultural identity and diaspora.In: P. Williams and L. Chrisman (Eds.), *Colonial discourse and post colonial theory: a reader* (pp. 227–237). London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Langdridge, D (2007) *Phenomenological psychology: theory, research and method.* London: Pearson Education Limited.

Sartre, J.P. (1964) *Black orpheus.* Available: massreview.org/sites/default/files/Sartre.pdf. Accessed 16th October 2018.