Experiences of racism and the changing nature of white privilege amongst lone white mothers of mixed-parentage children in the UK

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Abstract

In a context where mixed relationships are often seen as a visible indicator of increased tolerance, this paper holds up a lens to the particular experiences of racism negotiated by lone white mothers of mixed-parentage children. Based on qualitative interviews with thirty mothers, this paper illustrates how, through their parenting, racism and racial injustice became more visible to the mothers in the study. It is argued that as well as experiencing racism directed at their children in a range of contexts (including the extended family, school and the local area), lone white mothers of mixed-parentage children are frequently facing social disapproval themselves. Drawing on the notion of whiteness as a seemingly unmarked and invisible category, this paper argues that mothers' experiences can challenge and complicate dominant conceptualisations of white privilege.

Keywords: Interracial families, Racism, Whiteness, Family, Discrimination, United Kingdom.

Introduction

Whilst the growing number of mixed relationships in Britain has been held up as a sign of increasing racial harmony, research has found that mixed-parentage children are likely to experience overt racism, for example, in

the school playground (Tizard and Phoenix 1993; Alibhai-Brown 2001; Cline *et al.* 2002; Ali 2003). There is a growing literature around mixed-parentage young people and their families, however where racism is explored, the primary focus of the discussion tends to be on racism directed at the child, with a relative silence around the experiences of white mothers of mixed-parentage children. Despite this, white mothers, and particularly those who are lone parents, have been subject to a critical discourse that questions whether they have the necessary skills and mindset to support their children through these experiences (Twine 2000).

The meaning of the term 'racism' has been the site of considerable discussion and debate, in part due to the different historic and political trajectories imbued in the concept (Solomos and Back 1996). In this article racism is broadly conceptualized as centring on the exclusion and/ or inferior treatment of individuals or groups based on perceived 'racial' and cultural differences (Solomos 1989). This definition suggests that racism is comprised of both ideology and social processes (Solomos 1989). As Modood notes, '[r]acism normally makes a linkage between a difference in physical appearance and a (perceived) difference in group attitudes and behaviour' (Modood 2005, p. 38). Furthermore, these processes are understood to be inter-connected with other social divisions such as gender and class (Byrne 2006).

This article also draws on the critical study of whiteness which provides an understanding of the way in which whiteness has frequently been thought of as an 'unmarked' category (Frankenberg 1993). By

paying inadequate attention to discussions of whiteness, the danger is that it becomes reified as the norm from which minority ethnic 'others' are seen to differ (Frankenberg 2004). As Frankenberg explains, '[w]hiteness is a location of structural advantage in societies structured by racial dominance' (Frankenberg 2004, p. 113). For Seshadri-Crooks, who employs a Lacanian analysis of 'race', Whiteness is the 'inaugural signifier', that 'establishes a structure of relations, a signifying chain that through a process of inclusions and exclusions constitutes a pattern for organising human difference' (Seshadri-Crooks 2000:4).

This paper reflects upon the narratives of a group of white women who through their parenting, it could be argued, have a closer interaction with the consequences of racism than many white people. The discussion focuses on three key areas: the extended family, school and the local area. These are all areas of everyday interaction where racialized norms, assumptions and inequalities are played out. As such, the paper considers racism at the interface between intimate and public registers, and aims to consider the implications for the contemporary theorisation of whiteness.

Methodology

This article draws on interviews conducted between March 2004 and January 2005 for a study of the support networks of lone white mothers of mixed-parentage children in the UK. The sample was comprised of 30 mothers who categorized themselves as lone parents. Mothers taking part in the study were from a range of geographical locations including

more densely populated areas such as London, Manchester, Nottingham, Brighton, Bristol, and Sheffield, as well as more rural areas in Surrey, Hertfordshire and East Sussex. Interviewees were recruited from a wide range of sources comprising support groups for black and interracial families (n=11), a regional multiple heritage service (n=7), social services (n=2), support groups for lone parents (n=4), a regional NSPCC family support service (n=2), a regional race relations unit (n=1), an agency assisting lone parents to find employment (n=1) and snowballing (n=2). Prior to the interviews, mothers were asked to complete a short profile questionnaire providing demographic data, which was later analysed using SPSS. Interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 3.5 hours in length and generally lasted between 60-90 minutes and were tape-recorded with the permission of the interviewee.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim, and research notes were typed up. All names and potentially identifiable details were changed to protect anonymity. Transcripts were re-read to gain familiarity with the data and an initial coding framework was constructed. Many of these codes acted as descriptive labels for the text, which allowed the relevant parts of the transcripts to be identified for further analysis. Each code was defined and recorded so that it would be applied appropriately and consistently. The transcripts were imported into the computer package, Atlas.ti. to assist with managing the data. Part of the rationale for using Atlas.ti was that the data could be coded with ease without quotations having to be permanently separated from their original context. The initial thematic framework then formed the basis for the initial coding of 10

interview transcripts. Passages of text were matched with the appropriate code, and some passages had multiple codes applied. For example, both the codes 'racism' and 'feelings about the local area', were applied to a passage of text that suggested that a mother disliked her local area because of an experience of racism that occurred there. During the initial coding process, the thematic framework was refined to include other emerging codes that became apparent during the course of coding. Furthermore, some codes were amalgamated where overlap was found. After the initial coding framework was refined, the remaining 20 transcripts were coded.

Using Atlas.ti, the codes for each of the identified themes were printed out and each code was individually analysed for associations, patterns, tensions and insight into the research questions. The application of multiple codes helped to explore how different concepts or experiences could be related. During this process of analysis the researcher revisited the transcripts a number of times to allow the further exploration of emerging issues and analytical questions that arose.

This thematic generation of codes was combined with framework analysis. 'Framework analysis' is a systematic approach to analysing qualitative data which involves five key stages – familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting and interpretation (see Ritchie and Spencer 1994). This approach was employed because without a visual method of representation, it was difficult to gauge the extent that the particular findings or experiences were prevalent across all 30 interview transcripts. Large sheets of paper were used to construct grids

that focused on the key themes identified through the process described above. Sub-themes or related themes were listed horizontally in columns along the top of the page and rows for each of the 30 interviewees ran vertically. This allowed different interviewees' experiences to be considered in relation to the same theme or sub-theme, facilitating easy comparison between the experiences of individuals. Those cases that did not seem typical in the overall sample were not avoided but explored and included (Silverman 2001). In the boxes of this grid, references to relevant quotations from the transcripts were included. By adopting this method, the analysis remained close to the original data source: the words of the mothers interviewed.

Having described the methods of accessing the sample and data analysis, the demographic background of interviewees will now be outlined. The age distribution of interviewees ranged from 20 to 49 years old, with the mean age being 36. The majority of mothers (n=22) were single and had never been married. A smaller proportion of mothers were divorced (n=7) or separated (n=1). The data gathered on education showed that whilst there was considerable diversity in terms of educational qualifications, in general the sample had received a high level of education. A relatively high proportion (13 out of 30 mothers) had a university degree, and some held vocational qualifications in addition. This may reflect the background of mothers who belong to the particular support groups for black and interracial families which provided 11 out of 30 of the interviewees. In terms of employment, 16 mothers held a paid job whilst 14 mothers did not. Of those 16 mothers working, 9 were

employed full time and 7 were employed part time. Mothers in the sample had a variety of paid occupations including receptionist, food preparation / serving customers, working as an administrator for the civil service, working as a manager for a voluntary organization, counsellor, social worker and running their own small business.

To give some indication of the level of income mothers had, they were asked if they were currently living on benefits. A majority of 23 mothers were currently receiving state benefits, whilst a minority of 7 were not. A number of mothers were receiving Working Families Tax Credits, suggesting they were on a relatively low income even when in employment. Of the 13 mothers who held degrees in the sample, 10 were living on benefits. This suggests that for lone mothers, holding a degree does not necessarily translate into a high income. Almost half of the sample (14 mothers) lived in local authority rented accommodation while 8 mothers owned their own homes and 5 mothers rented their homes privately. In addition to this, one mother lived in a housing co-operative, one mother lived with her parents and one lived with a relative for whom she was the full time carer.

Mothers in the study had between 1 and 5 children, with 1 or 2 children being most common. Mothers had children aged from a few months old to 20 years old. The majority of children were aged between 4 and 15 years old. On the questionnaire completed prior to the interview, mothers were asked to describe their children using the 2001 census categories. The majority children (n=37) were described as Mixed White and Black Caribbean. A smaller number of children (n=11) were

described as Mixed White and Black African, Mixed White and Asian (n=4) and Any Other Mixed Background (n=6). Finally, three children were described as white. The data collected highlighted some of the limitations of the census categories for mixed-parentage children. For example, where the father was of Middle Eastern origin (such as Yemeni), one mother categorized her children as 'mixed white and Asian', whilst another categorized her children as 'Any other mixed background.' 'Any other mixed background' was also chosen by some mothers who came from a white minority ethnic group. For example, one Irish mother ticked this option for her children and wrote in 'Irish and North African'. Furthermore, although this was not apparent from the questionnaire data, in the interviews it emerged that 4 of the 58 mixed-parentage children had fathers who could themselves be described as mixed-parentage. This highlights some of the complexities of the 'mixed population' which has implications for conducting research in this area (Caballero, Edwards and Puthussery 2008; Song, Aspinall and Hashem, in progress).

The interviews sought to explore how mothers feel about and cope with the racism they and their children face. The researcher did not provide the mothers with a prescriptive definition of what experiences constituted racism, but rather sought to explore mothers' conceptualizations of their experiences. This was in order to explore mothers' understanding of racism from their perspective. The findings reveal a complex, multi-faceted and sometimes ambiguous process. Central to this complexity is the way in which mothers' own whiteness impacts on their experiences.

Racism within the family

The discussion of the empirical findings begins by focusing on the intimate context of the family, before moving to more public contexts of the school and neighbourhood. The findings from the in-depth interviews highlighted that for some mothers, entering into an interracial relationship or having a mixed-parentage child meant that their family members' racist views became more apparent. Illustrating this, Judy, a 25 year old mother described the reactions of her sisters when they found out she was pregnant:

They called me "nigger lover" and they said bad things like oh, "how can you carry a black man's baby inside you? You know, you're going to walk down the street and it's not going to be your colour", and stuff like that.

However, when the baby arrived attitudes softened:

But I think once he came along and they realised he's no different to us … one of them, she was really upset about everything she'd said and she really went all out and apologised, and she loves him to bits. And the other one's never really, you know, apologised for the things she said but I know she does love him and she won't look at him in that kind of way, as to want to be hurtful or say bad things about him.

Judy's account shows that attitudes may become more loving following initial hostility (see also Caballero, Edwards and Puthussery 2008). In other cases it was found that despite an overall affectionate relationship, ambiguity could materialize on occasion. Illustrating this, Jasmine, a 38 year old mother, described her own mother as 'absolutely devoted' to her teenage daughters. However, later in the interview she described the following experience:

One time I went to the little market near where she [Jasmine's mother] lives and I saw somebody from when I was at infants school, whom I recognised [and who] lived in the vicinity. And my mother sort of dragged the girls off because I mean she was too embarrassed to introduce them to this person because they would see what colour they were.

A sense of contradiction comes through in this quotation. On one hand, the maternal grandmother is 'devoted', yet on the other hand she appears embarrassed by her grandchildren. Again, colour based racism and fear of 'what other people will think' seems to be central to the experience. Thus, bringing the family form into the visibility of the community was felt to be of concern to some white family members. Echoing this, in their study of twenty one interracial couples in America, Rosenblatt, Karis and Powell (1995) note how members of the white partner's family who were opposed to the relationship sometimes

withheld information about the relationship from those around them. They suggest this 'may be a way of maintaining an image as an all-white family' (Rosenblatt, Karis and Powell 1995: 67).

Amongst the mothers interviewed for the present study, there were also some examples of enduring racism from family members. Abigail, a 35 year old mother, described how her Dad would not talk to her for three years after she became pregnant by a black man and therefore he did not meet his granddaughter until she was three. Abigail described how her daughter had been very upset on her 10th birthday when her grandparents had sent her a birthday card signed only with their first names:

> I saw her open it and I read it, that made my heart sink. I thought well you know, it's her birthday, you could have put 'lots of love', you could have put a few kisses. And I never said a word, but the next morning when I came down, I noticed that the card was stuck on the wall, and Ruby had written inside, 'To Ruby, with lots of love. See you soon'. So she'd written the intimate parts of what you would write to somebody that was your family and who you loved. And she was obviously writing what she'd hoped they'd write, and that just really broke my heart.

This quotation provides an insight into the emotional effects that the denial of affection can have for mothers and children. At the time of the

interview, Abigail had not seen her Dad (who she described as a 'white racist bigot') for the last two years.

In another example of overt racism, Heather described a campaign or harassment against her and her son:

We've had dog poo put through the door, we've had horrible phone calls, I've had racist hate mail, we've had BNP parading round the flats, I've had my washing stolen, I've had my son's bike stolen, I've been spat at, been sworn at, just a few things.

Heather went on to describe how her son experienced a violent racist attack at school, leaving him with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which meant he was unable to lead a normal life for a period of time. The particular salience of this harrowing account is that Heather was later at her parents' house when she noticed some BNP (British National Party) paraphernalia. After confronting her father, she discovered that he had been a BNP supporter for many years. The knowledge that her father had been complicit in the hateful campaign that had distressed her over the years led her to stop all contact with her father. Like Abigail's example above, this is another illustration of the way in which racism may lead to the loss of some members of the potential support network, with mothers seeking to protect themselves or their children's well-being by cutting off contact. In this way, some mothers are negotiating their own support networks to minimize harmful influences and try to surround themselves with more supportive ones**.** While some members of the white extended

family were found to be supportive (Harman 2007), where racism did occur it could be suggested to constitute a different experience from many minority ethnic families' experiences of racism, who may position racism as something outside of the family.

Previous research has suggested that lone mothers often have a greater reliance on their birth families than mothers with a partner (Dearlove 1999; Ghate and Hazel 2002). Yet this could lead to difficult situations in term of negotiating racist attitudes. Furthermore, where relationships are severed because of racism, mothers may be losing out on support that may otherwise have been provided.

Seshadri-Crooks (2000) draws our attention to the 'emotional force' of 'race', whereby it 'derives its power not only from socially constructed ideologies, but from a dynamic interplay between the family as a socially regulated institution, and biology as the site of essences and inheritances' (Seshadri-Crooks 2000, p.17-18). It is clear from the examples above that regulating the family involves policing the relationships of white women so that 'unmarked whiteness' is perpetuated. The sanctions directed at white women who have mixed-parentage children can be located in a historical context whereby interracial relationships have often been positioned as qualitatively different to relationships where individuals share the same ethnic background (Benson 1981). In particular, white women's relationships have historically faced increased scrutiny and have been more likely to have their relationships controlled and censored (Ware 1992). This has implications for whiteness in terms of an increased visibility and salience

attached to white mothers of mixed-parentage children. This means that mothers' parenting attracts increased attention as well as often-negative assumptions, resulting in the need to emotionally protect children and themselves.

Racism at school

Partly in response to experiences of racism in the family, the diversity of the school and the school's ability to deal with racism held extra significance. School operates as part of the formal structures of families' lives, and is also an area where policies, codes and procedures around racism should be present and accessible. Of relevance here, Tikly *et al.,* (2004) explored the educational needs of mixed-parentage pupils, based on national quantitative data on school achievement and qualitative research in fourteen schools. This study found that children of white and Caribbean heritage were performing below average and more likely to be excluded from school (ibid.). The researchers suggest a process whereby experiences of racism led children to adopt behaviours that were seen as challenging by teachers, which impacted negatively on their progress at school (Tikly *et al.*, 2004). Related to this, pupils often had a lack of confidence in teaching staff to deal with issues of racism, which led to reluctance to report these experiences. Some teachers were also found to hold stereotypical assumptions about mixed-parentage children and their families, particularly concerning children parented by lone white mothers (Tikly *et al.*, 2004).

Echoing findings from previous research (Alibhai-Brown and Montague 1992; Cline *et al.,* 2002) many mothers in the present study were concerned about how teachers responded to racism and whether schools had multicultural resources such as books that showed positive images of black people in order to promote positive identity development. For example, Abigail described her daughter Ruby's experiences when she first started school:

Ruby's had bullying at school, despite the fact that the school itself is very diverse…some of the girls, some of the black girls, even though they were 3 and 4 said to her, you know, you're not black enough to play with us. So she couldn't play with them. And then there were other white children that wouldn't acknowledge her at all…it's quite a weird situation to be in.

Previous research has highlighted the way in which mixed-parentage children may experience name-calling from both black and white people (Tizard and Phoenix 1993; Alibhai-Brown 2001; Tikly *et al.*, 2004). Abigail described how she sought to address this with the white male teacher who had appeared to dismiss her concerns.

Previous research on lone and partnered white mothers of mixed-parentage children has highlighted that transferring children out of a school is a strategy some white mothers employ in response to racism (Twine 2003). In the present study, a small number of mothers had

changed their children's schools (two mothers) or educated them at home (one mother) due to the school's perceived inadequacy at dealing with racism. For example, Maria's 12 year-old daughter was called 'brown like poo' by a boy at her school which was located in a mainly white area. Although the school initially dealt with this sensitively, when the boy continued to be aggressive (including physical violence), Maria felt that the teachers failed to respond. Maria heard that a black head-teacher had started at a nearby school, and decided to change her daughter's school.

In another example of mothers seeking to find the 'right' school or nursery for their children, Amy described how she had been exploring schools in her local area to find a school for her son:

> *I went to see the school which is down the road, and I said to a teacher that I've got a mixed race child, and I said how do you feel that you can look after a mixed race child, with the background being slightly different to most of the white, middle class children that come here? And erm, they just kind of swept it to one side, 'You know, well we treat all our children the same', and I thought well that's lovely! I need to know more than that, I need to know that you can look after him in a way that he won't feel that his colour is anything to feel embarrassed about, and that his needs don't get just swept under the carpet, that he's going to be made to feel that if he wants to fit in, he has to pretend to be white. And I often think*

> *that without meaning to, that's what people really mean, that*
>
> *they will treat everybody white.*

Amy's account shows that she felt uncomfortable with the 'colour blind' response from this school and it could be suggested that she was concerned about an assimilationist approach being taken to her son. She spoke about the difficulties of finding a suitable environment for her son living in a mainly white area. This shows an awareness that parenting her son involves, in her view, additional considerations than parenting a white child. Implicit in the quotation above are considerations relating to self-esteem and positive identity development. Some mothers were also found to employ strategies of supplementing the schooling if the level of diversity and curriculum content was not seen as adequate, including sending children to a Saturday school (an approach employed by two mothers) or joining support groups for interracial families. In addition, some less politicized mothers discussed the stress and difficulties they felt in approaching teachers at school to challenge racism, and felt they would benefit from more support in this area.

Byrne's (2006) study of 25 white mothers (a minority of whom had mixed-parentage children) in London also points to the importance mothers place on choosing the 'right' school and locates it as a raced and classed activity. However in Byrne's study, despite sometimes suggesting that a multi-cultural setting would enrich their children's lives, the dominant perspective appeared to be that mothers felt that difference should be restrained in order to pass on white middle class norms to their

children (Byrne 2006). Interestingly, another recent study (Reay *et al.*, 2007) explored the accounts of white middle class parents who actively chose to send their children to inner city comprehensive schools. The study highlights the way in which parents valued multiculturalism and also saw it as a kind of capital to be accumulated for children's benefit later in life, such as in the labour market (Reay *et al.*, 2007). In the present study, preferences for a multicultural school setting were primarily seen as related to concerns about the child's identity and mother's perceptions of the school's ability to deal with the racism their children were seen as likely to encounter. It is important to note that due to the structural position of lone parenthood some mothers found their choice of schools more limited, for example due to not being able to afford to run a car.

Relating these findings concerning schooling to theories of whiteness, mothers' narratives showed that they no longer shared some of the invisible, often unmarked features of whiteness identified by McIntosh (1988). McIntosh suggested that features of white privilege include freedom from having to make children aware of racism for their own protection and not having to be concerned about other people's attitudes towards their 'race'/ethnicity (McIntosh 1988). Further facets of white privilege involve the issue of representation in the surrounding culture, including schooling (McIntosh 1988). McIntosh suggests that taking for granted that children will be given course materials and course content that represent their ethnic background and implicitly support their family unit and represent their background are further aspects of white

privilege (McIntosh 1988). The findings from this research suggested that

mothers could not take these things for granted, were concerned about

them, and often worked hard to try to ensure their children's needs were

met in these areas. Having now considered experiences of racism in the

family and at school, this paper moves on to explore experiences of

racism in the local area.

Racism in the local area

Research has highlighted the significance of the local community for

parents (Gardner 2003; Barn, Ladino and Rogers 2006; Byrne 2006;

Barnes 2007) including families of mixed ethnicity (Caballero, Edwards

and Puthussery 2008). As well as often being the location of children's

schools, nurseries and after-school activities, the local area frequently

provides the setting for friendships and social networks for mothers

(Byrne 2006). At the same time, the local area can be a space where the

politics of entitlement and resentment are played out (Ray, Hudson and

Phillips 2008). In this way, it can be viewed as a space where intimate

and public registers meet. The findings showed that some mothers

viewed white residential communities as 'unsafe' both in the sense of

threat of physical violence and in terms of the potential harm for positive

racial/ ethnic identity development. Susan compared her local area (a

mainly white town), where she moved to be close to her sister who

provides childcare, with East London where she used to live:

> *I loved East London, I loved the diversity. I had a lot of friends*
>
> *from all different races and cultures...I never really wanted to*
>
> *move here but felt forced by my sort of predicament in*
>
> *childcare. I guess you have to weigh things up. For Shaun it's*
>
> *probably a better quality of life in terms of the resources I can*
>
> *access and the schooling is probably better. Smaller classes*
>
> *and...not the issues that they have in inner London schools.*

> *But for myself it doesn't feel a very comfortable environment*
>
> *because it's predominantly white. […] It is extremely racist,*
>
> *without a doubt and that is not addressed…my personal*
>
> *experience is that is not addressed within the schools…In*
>
> *terms of your ethnic origin and identity or being a parent of a*
>
> *black child that feels unsafe…yeah. You feel very different.*

The significance of 'feeling very different' is an interesting juxtaposition to mainstream theories of whiteness where whiteness is equated with sameness (to a perceived invisible and privileged norm) (Seshadri-Crooks 2000). However, in this physical space, Susan's emotional and psychological loyalties are to her son, who is positioned as a black child, and therefore 'other' to the white mainstream. She was particularly concerned that he may be the target of racist violence, having known that such attacks have occurred recently. As suggested above, Susan, like a number of mothers interviewed, expressed a tension between living in a more ethnically diverse (city) location (where the minority culture would be more visible and where children would be less

likely to 'stand out'), versus the perceived benefits of living in a rural location (good facilities, more open spaces and smaller classes). It was found that many mothers pondered on whether they were doing the right thing for their children, unsure of which area would be best. Mothers like Susan appeared to be actively 'weighing up' competing issues such as childcare, support networks, diversity, and the threat of racism, and sometimes (as in Susan's case) uncertainty remained about whether the right decision had been made.

A key finding of this research has been that not only were mothers negotiating racism directed at their children, they were also experiencing social disapproval themselves. In the majority of examples this disapproval took place in mothers' neighbourhoods and some of these gendered and racialized experiences of social disapproval will now be considered in more detail. Toni, a 20 year old mother explained that:

I didn't even realize that there was all this racism, that it was such an issue, until after I'd had the children.   And it was like 'Oh my God, people actually treat you differently because of the colour of your children. What the hell?' Like why should my kids have to go through that?

As we can see from the quotation above, some mothers expressed feelings of shock and surprise that a supposedly tolerant, multicultural country such as Britain can be the backdrop to such experiences. This suggests a change in viewpoint before and after having children

combined, in Toni's case, with incredulity and outrage. Previous research

has highlighted the way in which racism is a 'new' experience for many

white mothers of mixed-parentage children (Banks 1996; Barn 1999).

Therefore, according to Banks (1996), racism presents one of the

occurrences that their past experiences may not have fully prepared them

for. For some mothers in the present study, experiencing racism as a lone

white parent, without the support of the black partner present, further

heightened feelings of isolation.

In another example of social disapproval in the local community,

Jasmine, a 38 year old mother, described how she felt she has been

labelled as a social problem due to the ethnic background of her children:

It's getting to the point where I'm tired of fighting, you know,

being labelled all the time and you're being spat at by old

ladies…that happened yes, outside [the shopping centre]

waiting at the bus. An old lady spat at me…You know they

see me first [on my own] and it's okay. And then they see me

with my children and their perceptions change and then

they've labelled me as a different type of person...And you

know I'm just sick of it really.

Mothers' narratives show that although the discrimination they face

may be in some ways temporary and conditional (for example on being

seen with their children), these experiences are nonetheless draining,

depressing and damaging. In addition, many mothers felt that their

experiences of racism were not fully recognized as they are white. Thus, their specific experiences do not receive wide recognition in terms of public understanding of racism and discrimination.

A further stigmatising assumption highlighted in mothers' narratives was the assumption of promiscuity. Mothers described being assumed to be single by strangers, presumed to be sexually available, and seen as a threat by women that they might try to 'steal' their partner. As lone mothers, these assumptions were felt more keenly. This resulted in irritation and frustration that assumptions were being made about them, and in some cases led to a feeling of exclusion from potential social networks where mothers felt they would be viewed as a threat. Some mothers described being approached when walking in the streets in their local area. For example, 24 year old Lori described her experiences in her local area:

I find it quite difficult because there's a lot of men that maul you all the time. Like you're walking down the street with your child and a man will come up to you and be like 'Well, when do you want a boy?' or 'Give me a kiss'…and I find that really out of order in front of my daughter, 'cos she understands, and I don't want her to think that that's acceptable. Men like shouting 'Sexy' and all this stuff…

So what do you do? If you talk to them, that's encouraging to them and they'll stand and talk to you for half an hour and

follow you. If you don't talk to them you're being rude and

you're an ignorant white bitch who thinks they're too good….

Lori's account suggested she felt was being marked out as sexually available because of her daughter's parentage, which was taken as an indication that she was available to any black man. Yet Lori's recognition of the racialized differences and people's perception of her 'white privilege' meant she was constrained in her response. In this way 'race' and gender interlocked to create a difficult position and a feeling of vulnerability for the mother. Previous research has documented similar experiences, described by Banks (1996) in his study of 16 lone white mothers of mixed-parentage children aged 17-23 as 'verbalised sexual innuendos'. Frankenberg (1993, p. 88) theorized that the myth of black 'hypersexuality' can become transferred onto white women in interracial relationships. This has the effect of overtly sexualising and stigmatising white mothers of mixed-parentage children, potentially leading to the experience of isolation.

In addition to the above assumptions, mothers also felt their parenting was scrutinized. Some mothers felt they were viewed in negative terms, such as inadequate parents, wanting a 'trophy baby' with little understanding of the issues involved. This led to feelings of anger from some mothers, with one mother questioning those who stereotype her: 'How do you gather that I can't do her hair? How do you know if I read her a story at night?' Some mothers described the pressures of having to get their child's hair and clothes 'right', for fear of criticism from

members of the black community that they were not adequately parenting

their children. Previous research has highlighted the symbolic importance

of hair in terms of racial and ethnic identification for children of mixed-

parentage (Ali 2003; Tyler 2005).

Part of the discourse about mothers' maternal competence concerns

their ability to deal with racism experienced by their children (Camper

1994; Ifekwunigwe 1999). It has previously been suggested that is often

not possible for white mothers to have a full appreciation of racism

because they 'have not walked in that child's shoes' (Camper 1994: 6). Of

interest here, Twine's (2000) research explored black family members'

attitudes towards white mothers' parenting. Some mothers were

suspected of lacking what Twine refers to as 'racial empathy' – an ability

to psychologically relate to their children's experiences of racism (Twine

2000). It was also suggested that the standards black family members

applied to white mothers' parenting often appeared to exceed the

standards by which the interviewees evaluated their own mothers'

approaches to dealing with racism (Twine 2000). It is interesting that

while whiteness has been dominantly conceptualized as a privilege, it can

also be seen a hindrance in terms of people's perceptions of mothers'

'racial empathy' (ibid.). For some mothers in the present study, becoming

more involved in the minority culture (such as learning to cook Caribbean

food, braiding hair, learning the minority language, having black friends)

was seen as a way of circumventing stereotypes about white mothers of

mixed-parentage children. Thus, mothers sought, in various ways, to

show that they were not the women people held stereotypical attitudes

about – to distance themselves from this stereotype. However, this suggests that some mothers had, in a sense, internalized the stereotype as a 'truth', that they were the exception, rather than the rule (which was seen as a white woman having a 'trophy' black baby with little understanding of the issues surrounding a black or mixed-parentage up-bringing).

Interracial relationships have been described as occupying an ambivalent position in Britain, simultaneously being seen as both emancipatory and threatening (Fortier 2008). In response to inequality in Britain, and a legacy of racism whereby white people have been structurally advantaged, it can be argued that a critical gaze is directed towards white mothers' parenting from a number of different sources. Often-negative stereotypes and assumptions about white women in interracial families have been highlighted as present in the media (Caballero, Edwards and Puthussery 2008). This paper has provided examples to illustrate that entering an interracial relationship may lead to criticism from members of the white extended family, which can be temporary or more enduring. In the course of their parenting, previous research has suggested that mothers may face scrutiny from members of the black extended family (Twine 2000). Although further research is needed, there is also some evidence that stereotypical assumptions can be present in the attitudes of professionals such as teachers (Tikly *et al.*, 2004) and social workers (Olumide 2002; Harman 2009). Family form also plays an important role, as the most vehement criticisms have been directed at lone mothers. The final part of this paper considers how the

key themes and issues emerging from mothers' narratives can inform

existing theories of racism and whiteness.

Conclusion

It is evident that through their parenting experiences, racism and

racial injustice became more visible to the mothers in this study. In each

of the three areas this paper considered; the extended family, school and

the local area, mothers' narratives revealed experiences of racism and

the fear of further racism. These ranged from the occasional violent

incident to the everyday looks, questions or comments from those around

them. In these accounts, racism often appeared to be based on simple

'colour' or biologically based distinctions, where ethnic groups are

presented as essentially fixed and separate (Tyler 2005). Byrne's (2006)

argument that 'race' is a 'perceptual practice' appears to be supported

here – that is a way of seeing the human body and categorising

difference. In this study, mothers are seen and categorized into different

groups than their children, categories which are obviously crude and take

little account of biological relatedness or emotional connection.

Frankenberg (1993) highlighted the way in which white women are

socialized 'not to see' 'race'. Experiencing racism and seeking to facilitate

positive identity development for their children frequently compels some

mothers to see the 'unseen', and name discrimination based on

racial/ethnic differences. Such experiences may therefore make mothers

more conscious of their own whiteness, and the nature of race relations in

the United Kingdom. It could be argued that this change in consciousness

alters the nature of white privilege (Frankenberg 1993).

White privilege is recognized to be relative rather than fixed and unchanging (Frankenberg 2004). Therefore, it can be thought about in comparative terms. This can help illuminate how more or less white privilege can be present between individuals or how differing amounts can be experienced over the life course. Following on from this, the research findings suggest that as a result of attitudes towards white mothers of mixed-parentage children, mothers' experience of whiteness could be viewed as altered (Frankenberg 1993). This was shown by the contrast present in mothers' narratives between how they were treated with their children compared to when they were on their own. Previously identified aspects of white privilege include moving in public space without expecting embarrassment or hostility and having no difficulty finding neighbourhoods where people approve of the household (McIntosh 1988). The tensions evident in mothers' accounts over where to live suggests they rarely took such things for granted. It could be argued that the privilege here is the 'before factor', i.e. the freedom from racism in mothers' own childhood and before they had their children, as juxtaposed with the racism and social disapproval they and their children had experienced and were perceived as likely to experience in the future. White privilege then can be conceptualized, at least in part, as the knowledge of what it is to live without racism and the fear of racism. Ironically, mothers appeared to become more conscious of this at the same time that they could no longer take it for granted.

What of the further privileges of whiteness? Could it be argued that the structural (economic) advantages of whiteness mean that white women are more likely to be able to mobilize resources that will support their parenting? The study suggested that as lone parents, the majority of whom were living on state benefits, mothers' access to structural privilege appeared to be limited. An understanding of the fragmentation of whiteness must take family form and economic power into account.

Although by no means a homogenous group, white mothers of mixed-parentage children often experience a loss of white privilege due to the effects of racism and the desire to protect their children and themselves from its pernicious effects. While whiteness has been conceptualized as an unmarked category (Frankenberg 1993), in this context it appears to become more socially marked. The findings point to the way in which this group can become 'racialized', resulting in negative consequences such as exclusion from some family networks. It could be argued that the above considerations challenge dominant conceptualisations of whiteness that emphasize whiteness solely as a source of power and oppression. It is hoped that this study has contributed an understanding of the complexities that being a lone white mother of mixed-parentage children brings to bear on white privilege.

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