

## Comment: Raising Questions About Perspectives on Black Lone Motherhood

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### ABSTRACT

'Race' and ethnicity have been muted features of British academic social policy debates around lone motherhood and in the stance taken by organisations representing lone parents. However, black lone motherhood is now receiving attention in both black, and white-dominated media. In this article, we examine the ways different groups of people in Britain address – or avoid – black lone motherhood. We raise a number of questions for social policy researchers to consider around whether and how black lone motherhood may be constructed and discussed.

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### INTRODUCTION

'Race' and ethnicity have been a curiously muted feature of British academic social policy discussions around lone motherhood: the emphasis has been on the implications of different routes into lone motherhood. This situation is in contrast to both academic and popular debates in the United States, where the discourse around lone motherhood has been racialised for some time, with much of the focus upon black lone mothers on welfare (Morris, 1994). White-dominated organisations representing lone mothers in Britain have also been silent on the subject of black lone motherhood. Until recently, the same was true for popular representations of lone mothers. This might be thought to be the result of the situation whereby black lone mothers constitute a relatively small proportion of all lone mothers in Britain: 'black Caribbean' and 'black other' lone mother households form just under 5 per cent of lone mothers, as compared with over 90 per cent of white lone mother households (1991 Census). However, black lone mothers are currently a focus of attention in the British mainstream white-dominated media. The issue has also been raised in media directed at, and coming out of, the black population, in newspapers, novels and theatre. In their coverage, both

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white-dominated and black media use the black English terms 'baby-mother' and 'babyfather'. These are terms increasingly used to refer to black women and men, of any age, who have children with a number of short-term partners, although their black English meaning is merely 'the mother/father of my/his/her baby'. Thus the use of these expressions within the black population generally is controversial because of their, now, pejorative connotations.

In this article, we look at the ways different groups of people in Britain may address – or avoid – black lone motherhood. We raise a number of questions for social policy researchers to consider around what, if anything, constitutes the issue of black lone motherhood and, if it is an issue, whether and how this may be discussed. Our aim here is to set off debate amongst social policy researchers. As such, this 'comment' piece is of a polemical nature (although we do draw on research we have conducted in other contexts.<sup>1</sup> We are concerned with the popular discourses that are emerging around black lone motherhood in Britain, and which social policy researchers have barely begun to acknowledge. It is necessary to engage with them because defining an issue is an important part of policy formulation; discourses help to inform how policies should be constituted and changed. In coming to have their own reality, and thus setting agendas, such discourses can also shape how an issue is considered and approached by social policy researchers.

#### THE 'FACTS'

Two main features of the black population in Britain provide the 'facts' cited in the discussions of black lone motherhood in both the black and mainstream media. The 1991 Census revealed that just over six out of ten black women between the ages of 20 and 39 are single, as compared with under four out of ten white women. The figures also reveal that, while black women are not becoming wives, this does not mean they are not becoming mothers: just over 50 per cent of all black babies are born to lone mothers (*Guardian*, 13 June 1994), and nearly half of all black families are headed by a lone parent (overwhelmingly women) (1991 Census).

These figures do not really tell us anything about relationships between black men and women, and they do not tell us anything new. As with births to white single (never-married) mothers, black babies may be born into stable co-habiting or monogamous 'live-out/visiting' relationships<sup>2</sup>, and we have long had evidence that a particular group of black women, of African-Caribbean origin, delay marriage but not childrearing (Brown, 1984). And, of course, if just over half of all black babies are

born to unmarried black women, there is also the fact that just under half of them are not.

What we do not have any firm evidence for is that black women are becoming 'babymothers' – having children by a series of different 'babyfathers' who are uncommitted to fatherhood and family life. Nevertheless, that black women are becoming 'babymothers' is treated as an accepted feature of articles in the black as well as the mainstream press – although eliciting different concerns and implications. We now turn to look at the images presented in such media, considering their similarities and differences, as well as their relevance to black lone mothers' perceptions of their situation.

#### DEBATES IN THE BLACK MEDIA

Regardless of any evidence about the prevalence of 'babymothers', over the past few years at least, *The Voice* (self-styled 'Britain's best black newspaper') has devoted ongoing attention to relationships between black men and women. Three main, linked, themes run throughout their coverage of the issue.

Firstly, there is the theme of the lack of fathers' involvement in child-rearing and family life. The firm stance taken is that black men should be monogamous and more involved. A *Voice* leader (19 Apr. 1995) comments:

Many of our men do not take responsibility for the families they do have ... instead of advocating a society in which men can have their cake and eat it, it should be impressed on them that one woman and one family is quite enough.

However, the reasons given for this situation largely focus on black women. Either the men's 'babymothers' will not let them be involved and/or black mothers do not bring up their sons in a way that fits them for committed fatherhood, as these two extracts from *Voice* articles reveal:

fathers should contribute financially to the maintenance of their children but only if they are allowed to play an active part in the upbringing of that child – something which a lot of babymothers won't allow. (28 June 1994)

Mothers need to prepare their sons for the new world where, increasingly, he will not be king. There is no point in pampering him in the way so many Black mothers do. (2 Aug. 1994)

Moreover, black women are said to be displaying characteristics that mean that, not only do they not allow or *encourage* black fathers, but black men are unlikely to want them. This forms part of the second theme: that of relationships between black women and men. Black

women are portrayed as falling into two main types: the 'fly-girl' baby-mother, whose only interest is in having a good time, or the 'fly-past' self-obsessed career woman (*Voice*, 25 Jan. 1995). In particular, black women's success educationally and in the labour market is seen as pointing up a crisis in black manhood, which has an economic base. The themes of crisis in black manhood and of the black superwoman have recurred over time, especially in the US (for example, during the 1960s around the *Moynihan Report*, 1965, on the black family, and during the late 1970s and 1980s around Michelle Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman*, 1979, and W. J. Wilson's work, 1987, on the plight of the black underclass). In terms of the economic base, black men's lack of eligibility and their marginalisation within family life is linked to their position, or rather lack of one, in the labour market (an analysis that rests on a theory of male dominance in the family and the economy – Smith, 1993).

But what do black women and men do if they do not want each other? The third theme in the coverage is black/white relationships. Black women and black men are said to be looking to white people for what is missing in their relationships with each other. According to *Voice* columnists, black women are bemoaning 'the fact that all Black men are either gay, in jail, unemployed or only interested in White women' (2 Aug. 1994), and the 'fly-past' black woman is 'telling her audience that if these brothers don't shape up then she's going to find one of those caring White guys' (25 Jan. 1995).

These issues are reflected in other black cultural media (including comedy, theatre, music and novels). They have also produced a lively debate in the letters page of *The Voice*. Interestingly, correspondence on the letters page has focused on the second and third themes, rather than the first. Although there is no one consensus around multiple partnering, where multiple relationships do exist they do not seem to be regarded as a 'problem' per se by readers.

#### ISSUES FOR BLACK LONE MOTHERS

Indeed, there is evidence that the main problems perceived by black lone mothers (whether 'babymothers' or otherwise) are that their children's fathers are not always providing them with enough or any financial, practical or emotional support, and that they have to cope with poverty and racism in bringing up their children. One of the black women interviewed as part of Simon Duncan and Ros Edwards' research on lone mothers' uptake of paid work (see note 1) remarked that, 'most people are by themselves cos most men have more than one woman', when she

was explaining that there were lots of lone mothers in her neighbourhood. This particular woman may or may not represent the views of other black women. What her remark does demonstrate is that, even for someone who accepts the existence of 'babymothers' and 'babyfathers', this can be an acceptable 'norm' rather than a 'problem'. What she and other black lone mothers often did state as problems were a lack of supportive input from their children's fathers, and poverty. These were issues they shared with many of the white lone mothers interviewed for this study.

But black lone mothers do not share another problem with their white counterparts – racial stereotyping. As another of the black interviewees explained:

They've [white lone mothers] got different problems than us. Being black does make a difference if you're a single parent. I think we're looked down on more ... being a single parent, you're a burden anyway, and being black is even worse. I think they expect more from us. I think that sometimes they think we're scrounging from them, more than a white single parent might have that pressure put on them ... Because they think it's the majority of us that are doing it.

Thus black lone mothers may well regard support, poverty and racism as the main issues, rather than their lone motherhood.

Nevertheless, debates about 'babymothers' and black gender relationships are seen as legitimate issues for discussion within the black-based media. However, they may also be debates that are seen as internal 'private' matters, not to be broadcast more widely. For example, a *Voice* leader asks, 'which other race stands up and hollers so long and loud about how bad their men are?' Such issues have become more 'public', however, receiving attention in the mainstream white-dominated media. Indeed, they may well have been picked up from black media such as *The Voice* itself.

#### WHITE MEDIA PRESENTATIONS

'Babymothers' and 'gender war' have formed the topic of several features in the broadsheet newspapers, notably the *Guardian* (e.g., 13 June 1994, 21 Mar. 1995), *Sunday Times* (for example, 19 Feb. 1995) and *The Independent* (e.g., 2 June 1993; 30 Jan. 1995). There has also been discussion on mainstream radio magazine programmes (including 'The Locker Room' and 'Woman's Hour'), and sketches on the black TV comedy programme 'The Real McCoy'. Moreover, as in the US, links have been made between black lone motherhood and the welfare benefits issue in the British tabloid press. For instance, a *Sunday Express*

front page article, headlined 'The Ethnic Timebomb' (13 Aug. 1995) placed the statistics on black lone motherhood alongside the welfare bill figures, with an implicit causal relationship between the two. Given the relatively small proportion of black lone mothers and the fact that they are much more likely to be economically active and in full-time employment than white lone mothers (Bartholomew et al., 1992), this is clearly scaremongering journalism.

In contrast, most of the broadsheet and other mainstream media presentations have had some input from black journalists or broadcasters, and – perhaps deriving from it – they are organised around the same main themes that appear in the black press. Nevertheless, even where there is input from black journalists, there are differences between the coverage in the black and the white-dominated media. Importantly, in the black press there is a sense of debate. The topic is often presented in named 'personal opinion' columns and their black readership joint in through the letters page, agreeing or disagreeing with the postulations. In the mainstream press, the topic becomes one of presenting an undisputed 'this is how it is' situation. There is little element of argument (outside the one that supposedly is going on between black women and men) and no black readership response.

Moreover at points the issue becomes sensationalised, as in the *Sunday Express* article (13 Aug. 1995). This article also extrapolates what they term 'the Linford Christie syndrome' (the black athlete who apparently has three children by two single mothers) from one man to the wider black population. An article in *The Independent* (30 Jan. 1995) is another good example of sensationalism and also of exoticism. Here, the black English meaning of 'babymother' – the mother of my/his baby – becomes subverted to 'little more than a baby who is a mother':

Lisa is a 15-year-old schoolgirl with almond eyes and sleek black skin ... Inside her is a three-month-old baby, the result of a fly-by-night affair with a 25-year-old black man ... She still sees the father occasionally, but he has three other Baby Mothers to keep him occupied as well as a string of girlfriends.

This article then moves from the 'babymother' to the 'gender war' theme, revealing that, while black women turn to white men because they are more likely to be successful in the labour market, it is sexual adventurousness that is behind men's desire for white women. The sexual images of black women and men being promulgated here have a long history.

Rather than a serious attempt to understand black people and their lives, the media spotlight on black people in a predominantly white society such as Britain arrives at sensational explanations based upon the

mythologising of differences between white and black people. But are there such differences when it comes to the 'gender war'?

#### A BLACK ISSUE?

Many of the concerns elaborated within the 'black battle of the sexes' seem similar to those rehearsed in discussions about the general (white) growth in lone motherhood – for example, the view that lone mothers are to blame for 'rejecting' their respective male partners. In addition, there are similarities between white men and black men in their concerns about the state of 'the family', whether these be white or black families. For instance, according to the black organiser of a men's discussion group quoted in one broadsheet article: Where does it leave the black family if so many women decide that they want to stay single, with or without children? What are the consequences for black boys who have no male role models in their families? (*Sunday Times*, 19 Feb. 1995). Perusal of the Institute of Economic Affairs' book, *Families Without Fatherhood* (Dennis and Erdos, 1993) shows it contains mirror images of these questions, mainly being asked by white men about white families and boys. It would seem that the putatively terrible 'battle between the sexes' amongst black men and women is not that different, in many respects, from that in the wider predominantly white population. Additionally, in terms of supposed black concerns about 'mixed race' relationships, these have hardly been unknown amongst white people, but for rather different reasons (and most overtly under apartheid systems).

But a more pertinent question in the context being examined here is, why are black lone mothers now receiving more attention in the wider press? The focus on black lone motherhood may well be linked to current broader concerns that have identified parenting and family breakdown as key threats to society, as exemplified by the absence of fathers and the headship of mothers. Arguably, through exotic media explorations of black family life, 'we' (whites) are vicariously examining 'our' fears of social breakdown, not only around the growth of lone motherhood but also over relationships between men and women. Lone mothers generally, in Britain, are becoming less likely to be seen as victims of social problems and more likely to be identified as instigators in the collapse of both the work ethic, the traditional family and society's moral order (Edwards and Duncan, 1996). Alarmists could see the phenomena of the 'babymother' and 'babyfather' as an extreme manifestation of the abdication of fathers as both breadwinners and as parents providing guidance and moral supervision. The behaviour of black men and

women, and black lone motherhood, is thus something to point to as 'not us', but which enables 'us' to safely displace onto, and play out, 'our' wildest fears through looking at 'them' (black people). This is a similar transference process to that which occurred in relation to crime and young black males in the 1970s (see Hall et al. 1978), as well as more recently.

The context whereby lone mothers are being targeted politically as responsible for the disintegration of society, is one which means that organisations that represent lone mothers may wish to be very careful about the image they portray of their constituents.

#### ORGANISATIONS REPRESENTING LONE MOTHERS

That organisations representing lone mothers are concerned about media presentations is evidenced by the action taken by the National Council for One Parent Families (NCOPF) over the Panorama TV programme 'Babies on Benefit' (20 Sept. 1993). This documentary purported to show the reality of lone motherhood: young, single – and white – women, having a string of babies, living off benefits and in council housing, and who could not see the point in working or having men in their lives in any permanent fashion. NCOPF went to court over this, accusing the makers of the documentary and the BBC of presenting a skewed and false image. Both the NCOPF and Gingerbread (a national 'self-help' organisation for lone parents) have also been prominent in countering political and media images of young single mothers getting pregnant in order to get on the 'fast track' to council housing. Both, however, have been silent on the treatment of black 'babymothers' in the mainstream press.

Organisations representing lone mothers may be reluctant to discuss the situation of black lone mothers, given the government's portrayal of lone mothers as 'welfare scroungers'. From the 1970s onward, the NCOPF has made a particular effort to stress an image of the typical lone mother as a responsible divorced or separated parent, doing her best for her children in difficult circumstances (Song, 1996). In the current situation, where lone mothers are increasingly seen as a threat to society, the NCOPF has emphasised the importance of negotiating a 'safe' image of lone mothers, maintaining *that* they must be careful to avoid potentially incendiary images of lone mothers which emphasise differences rather than commonalities with other families. They are also nervous about a racialised discourse occurring in Britain, as it is in the US: 'we have to be very careful about what image we portray of lone mothers, and therefore may not necessarily portray the mixed image we want to all the time. We

feel it's quite important to be quite sensitive about that. We don't want to set off a debate about black lone mothers (interview with Sue Monk, Policy Officer, NCOFP, 17 Jan. 1995, see note 1).

While such fears may be understandable, this position leaves black lone mothers with no-one to speak on their behalf about scurrilous media portrayals – a situation acknowledged by Gingerbread's chief executive: 'We're very much a white organisation ... there aren't any large national organisations that can represent the views of the black community. So I wonder if the NCOFP or ourselves would react to something about black lone parents in the same way that we have about the Panorama programme.' But he went on to say that, if 'race'/ethnicity were to be addressed: 'The benefit is that it gets some kind of debate going about understanding what different kinds of family models there are, and coping with that diversity rather than insisting there should be one particular family type' (interview with Kieran Murphy, chief executive, Gingerbread, 24 Mar. 1995, see note 1). So, addressing 'race'/ethnicity in the debate on lone motherhood has the potential strength of showing diversity in family forms, and how these need not be perceived as a problem, although it also may potentially fuel racism.

But there are other problems inherent in such a course for organisations representing lone mothers. As Graham Crow and Michael Hardey have argued, it is 'the diversity of lone parent households which limits their collective strength, while the blurred boundary surrounding lone parenthood creates ambiguities relating to identity and action as lone parents' (1992, p. 143). Organising around such a shimmering and ambiguous overall category of people may prove difficult for organisations like NCOFP and Gingerbread; their very rationale may disappear!

While political considerations are important in shaping the desired social images of lone mothers, conceptualising lone parents as a broad category, stressing commonality amongst the various groups comprising the category, may also be problematic in obscuring differences between different types of lone mother families (Song, 1996). Considerations around preserving an homogeneous and 'safe' image of lone mothers, as a group, are leading white-dominated lone mother organisations to avoid discussion of black lone mothers altogether – even the aspects of their situation that black lone mothers themselves identify as problematic, such as the feeling of being negatively singled out on the basis of being black.

The question is, are UK social policy researchers doing much the same thing, with our concentration on routes into lone motherhood, and our lack of attention to 'race'/ethnicity and to diversity in family forms?

## QUESTIONS FOR SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCHERS

In considering how and if social policy researchers should address the issue of black lone mothers in Britain, two issues are primary. Firstly, to what extent should commonalities or differences between white and black lone mothers be emphasised, and what are the political and policy implications of emphasising one or the other? Secondly, if researchers do point to the need to engage with debates around black lone mothers, and that may identify distinctive experiences associated with their ethnicity, how should this be done?

Some recent work on lone parent families has pointed to the ways that, depending on the route into lone motherhood, as well as the different class and ethnic backgrounds of lone mothers, the needs, opportunities and experiences of these groups may be quite disparate (Crow and Hardey, 1992). Focusing policy analysis upon the routes into lone motherhood, however, can be problematic. It may inadvertently reinforce the trend towards seeing lone mothers as actively responsible for the collapse of 'the family', rather than the more traditional conception of them as passive victims of social problems. It certainly moves us even further away from the unstigmatised positioning of lone mothers as just one part of general lifestyle diversity, which allows us to conceptualise fluidity and complexity in people's relationships (see Edwards and Duncan, 1996, on these various positions). Moreover, the conceptualisation of straightforward routes into (and, conversely, exiting from) lone motherhood have been based predominantly upon institutional (white) categories. In any case, more creative attention to these issues would certainly provide a contrast with the simplistic picture of former relationships assumed by the Child Support Act. Indeed, rather than routes, the overall support that lone mothers receive from their social networks may be just as important a factor in their lives and just as relevant a policy and research focus (Duncan and Edwards, 1996).

It seems to us that we need to address 'both' commonalities and differences between the experiences of black and white lone mothers, but finding the right balance between the two is by no means clear-cut. Many lone mothers of various ethnicities share in common their poverty and need for more material, practical and emotional support. Furthermore, a key commonality which seems to be shared by black and white lone mothers is that they have had to bear the onus for concerns about 'family breakdown'.

Yet the discourses developing around black lone motherhood are also distinct from those surrounding white lone mothers, because they

have been based upon racialised understandings of black women and men – their family lives and sexuality. In predominantly white societies, black women in particular often become the focus of anxieties about ‘the family’ and gender relationships, given their supposedly excessive promiscuous fertility (Gilroy, 1992). As we have intimated at various points, black people recursively become the means by which ‘we’ examine our own (white) fears. Elaboration of the reasons for this are beyond the scope of our current discussion. Rather, we are concerned with, at least, beginning a debate among social policy researchers in place of the academic silence on black lone motherhood.

Although there is a danger of engendering unfounded moral panics about black lone motherhood, we believe that the dangers of social policy researchers not addressing black lone motherhood are even greater. Incorporating black lone mothers’ experiences within those of white lone mothers, within social policy research, may be tantamount to denying their very existence – despite the best of intentions. Moreover, as we have attempted to show, debates about black lone motherhood now circulate in the realm of popular discourse and culture, whether or not social policy researchers identify them as a group worthy of study.

As we stated initially, the emerging discourses around black lone motherhood in Britain are important in shaping definitions of the issue and, coming to have their own reality, may set the agenda for policy formulation. There is still very little rigorous social policy analysis on black lone motherhood in Britain. Surely, more empirical research, carried out in collaboration with black organisations and researchers, and privileging the situation and voices of black lone mothers, is required?

NOTES

- 1 Specifically, we have separately carried out pieces of research concerned with lone motherhood generally, rather than black lone mothers in particular. These separate studies, however, have led to our joint concern with the issues discussed in this article. Miri Song’s work (1996) has considered the changing ways in which lone mothers’ poverty and dependence upon state benefits has been perceived over time, with a particular focus on the 1970s, when the *Finer Report* was key in stressing the commonalities of lone parents’ situation. Views and quotes from the National Council for One Parent Families are taken from this research. Ros Edwards’ work, with Simon Duncan (for example, Duncan and Edwards, 1996; Edwards and Duncan, 1996) has concerned the patterns and processes underlying lone mothers’ uptake of paid work. As part of this, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 65 British lone mothers, including 19 of African-Caribbean and black British origin. Views and quotes from black lone mothers and *Gingerbread* are taken from this research, which is funded by the ESRC under grant number R000234960.
- 2 Relationships where the man does not live permanently in the same household as the woman and their child/ren, but comes to stay for periods of time (and see Thorogood, 1987, on ‘outside’ families).

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