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Working effectively with African-Caribbean young women: an intersectional approach

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Introduction

To work effectively with young African-Caribbean women, professionals and practitioners in health, social care, youth work and education must have some understanding of the lives and contexts of young black women in the United Kingdom. In relation to the research on young people in the UK, young black women have been largely invisible. The focus in the academic literature has been on young African-Caribbean men. Here young African-Caribbean men are perceived as being low achievers in terms of education, involved in the criminal justice system as perpetrators of antisocial and violent crimes - mugging, shooting, involvement in gangs, and, more recently, knife crime - and users of mental health services. Young men are represented as being reluctant fathers, with no role models to look up to in their communities (Sewell, 1997; Reynolds, 2009). While this portrayal of young black men is negative and incorrect, young black women receive little attention.

This chapter aims to address the lack of focus on young African-Caribbean women. It outlines the history and experience of African-Caribbean young women in the UK and provides a demographic overview of African-Caribbean young women, exploring their educational experiences and attainment. This review takes an intersectional approach, outlining current research on 'race', ethnicity, gender and identity, and argues that African-Caribbean young women are invisibilised in social research on young people in the UK. It provides an illustration of the need for practitioners to take account of intersecting social identities, and secondarily shows the value of research as evidence to inform critical practice with children and young people.

Demographic overview

African-Caribbean people constituted 1.1% (594,825 people) of the population in England and Wales in 2011 (ONS, 2012). This percentage rises if mixed-race individuals having African-Caribbean ancestry are included. In the last census one third of the mixed-race group had an African-Caribbean parent and a white parent. Just over 20% of Black Caribbeans in England and Wales were aged 15 and under, while 57.5% of people of mixed Black Caribbean and white background were aged 15 and under, and hence this group has a much younger age profile than the general population. The African-Caribbean population has remained fairly stable since the census in 2001 in terms of its size and overall percentage of the wider UK population. However, while the Black Caribbean and Black British population was larger than the Black African population in the UK in 2001, this situation has changed dramatically since 2001 and at the time of writing (2019) the Black African population is now twice as large as the Black Caribbean and Black British population because of increased migration from Africa.

While African-Caribbean young women are diverse in relation to ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability/disability, religion and age, it is important to recognise that all of these axes of oppression intersect. An intersectional approach considers the intersecting axes of oppression and discrimination that cut across each other and may influence and change each other (Hankivsky and Christoffersen, 2008).

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For example 'race, gender and class are not additive, but interlocking, interactive and relational' (Mullings, 2002: 80). Developed by black feminists, intersectionality theory tries to address the complexity of social life by recognising that individuals simultaneously occupy multiple social locations. Lewis (2013) argues that intersectionality can be conceived as a theory, concept, methodology, heuristic or in fact all four. Furthermore, an intersectional approach pays attention to both the historical and contemporary processes that create social hierarchies (Mullings, 2005).

The social context of African-Caribbean families in contemporary Britain

The term 'African-Caribbean' has been used inconsistently by researchers in the UK (Agyemang et al, 2005). Some researchers use it to refer to people who are Black and of Caribbean descent, with others referring to people who are of Caribbean descent. This presents difficulties when comparing research findings on 'African-Caribbean' communities in the UK. In this chapter, I use the terminology 'African-Caribbean' to refer to people of African heritage who were born in the Caribbean or whose parents or grandparents were born in the Caribbean. Even this terminology is fraught with difficulties, as many terms are used, such as Black British and Black Caribbean.

This section of the chapter explores migration from the Caribbean to the UK to set the context of the lives of young Caribbean women in contemporary Britain. The most significant period of migration from the Caribbean to the UK was between the 1950s and the 1970s. One of the main reasons that people migrated from the Caribbean to the UK in the post-war period was in search of a better life for themselves and their children (Douglas, 2018). Research conducted by Platt (2005), in a study designed to investigate the effects of migration, social class background, educational qualifications and intergenerational social mobility of ethnic groups in England and Wales, reported that Caribbean parents experienced downward social mobility on migration to the UK. While the children of Caribbean migrants obtained some upward social mobility, this was not to the same extent as children of other minority ethnic groups, such as Indian migrants. Despite having educational qualifications, Caribbeans were more likely to experience increased risk of unemployment and to be in marginal positions in employment. Large differences in African-Caribbean male and female employment were reported by Barn et al (2006). 72% of Black Caribbean women were in employment, but Black Caribbean men were more than three times more likely than white men to be unemployed. Barn and colleagues (2006) found that compared with white mothers and African mothers, Caribbean mothers were twice as likely to report financial problems as the percentage of lone parents was higher in African-Caribbean communities, although Black Caribbean lone parents were more likely to be in employment when compared with other ethnic groups. Hence African-Caribbean children born in the UK are often born into families where family members experience racism at many different levels in their lives and have to develop effective strategies to deal with everyday racism.

Caribbean families have been portrayed as pathological and deviant in health and social policy literature (Lawrence, 1982). This has been based on perceptions of absent fathers and

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predominantly matriarchal family structures (Goulbourne, 2003). This view has been perpetuated throughout the Caribbean diaspora (Clarke, 1999). Research studies on African-Caribbean family life have reported that a greater percentage of African-Caribbean mothers are single parents (Reynolds, 2005). Reynolds (2009) and Williams et al (2012) reported that although black fathers might not live with their children, they were actively involved in parenting and provided additional material and social capital to their children. However, African-Caribbean families often live in areas of social deprivation and high residential concentration and may be vulnerable to socioeconomic disadvantage, which is typically associated with single-parent households (Douglas, 2018). This having been said, it has to be acknowledged that in these areas, the presence of other African-Caribbean families and an extended kinship network, including grandparents who provide ongoing support (Goulbourne, 1999; Reynolds, 2005; Ochieng, 2011), predisposes African-Caribbean people to choose to reside in these areas rather than choose alternative residential areas.

Parenting practices in African-Caribbean families have received much attention in the academic literature on social policy and in the popular press. On the one hand, black parents received opprobrium (Jones, 2013) for not parenting their children appropriately or providing suitable discipline and guidance, and on the other hand, black parents are accused of using corporal punishment to discipline their children. Although Caribbean families and parenting practices are heterogeneous, several academic researchers have pointed to the importance of discipline in Caribbean families, primarily to ensure that their children have a greater chance of social mobility than the parent generation, but also to demonstrate to other members of their families and their communities that they are respectable and that their children are respectful and obedient (Leo-Rhynie, 1997; Ochieng, 2010; Reynolds, 2010). Ochieng (2010) reported that discipline emerged as a primary factor in child-rearing approaches with black families. According to Ochieng (2010), child discipline strategies among African-Caribbean families who participated in her study appeared to be subject to continuing generational change, increasingly relying on strategies emphasising cooperation rather than physical control. In her study on Caribbean mothering, Reynolds (2010) reported that Caribbean mothers felt that an important part of their role was to transmit Caribbean cultural values and identity through teaching their children about their historical legacies. They did this by using cultural signifiers such as food, by celebrating Caribbean traditions and by fostering transnational links. Although Caribbean food has received limited critical attention from academic researchers, apart from in health, nutrition and anthropology, it is of immense significance in Caribbean families as a mechanism to maintain links with the Caribbean. Reynolds discusses the commitment that Caribbean mothers have to preparing Caribbean food as a mechanism through which they can transmit cultural identity intergenerationally and sustain links with the Caribbean. In the early years of migration to the UK it was difficult to obtain certain foods, and aspects of a 'Caribbean identity' such as diet, music, religion and an extended kinship network were compromised. However, in many inner-city areas these resources are now available to Caribbean communities (Reynolds, 2004). Mothers further identified that respect and the good manners of their children were of utmost importance and that they felt it was important to maintain discipline

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for the benefit of the child. However, Reynolds (2010) reported that African-Caribbean mothers who were from a middle-class background were less likely to use physical punishment. Qualitative research by Barn and colleagues (2006) challenged assumptions and stereotypes of minority ethnic families and parenting. They reported that the parenting practices of minority ethnic families were shaped by a wide range of cultural practices including those of their own parents, other ethnic groups and majority ethnic groups in society. Their research challenged commonly articulated assumptions that minority families used more punitive methods to discipline children than other parents. However, Barn and colleagues (2006) reported that Caribbean parents were less likely to discipline their children in punitive ways.

"To me you have to break that cycle. I cannot do to my children what . . . I'd seen with my older siblings, no I just can't do it, they are my children. I didn't bring them into this world to abuse them, it's not my way." (Caribbean mother, quoted in Barn et al 2006: 43)

One of the key differences identified in the research by Barn and colleagues was the difference between white parents and minority ethnic parents in relation to their attitudes to education. Minority ethnic parents and Caribbean parents in particular saw that a good education was important to counter discrimination in future employment.

"Young people need education in school. Without education you get nowhere in life. That's the main point. I always say to my kids, 'When you go to school, it's for you to learn and not mess about, because when the time comes for you to leave school and you've got no education, it doesn't matter if the teacher don't like you, she's not there to be liked, she's there to teach'. I always tell them that. Without education, you get nowhere in life." (Caribbean mother, quoted in Barn et al. 2006: 54)

Caribbean parenting practices were closely related to the educational aspirations they had for their children, as parents encouraged further education and educational achievement as a means of achieving social mobility. This further demonstrates the expectations that Caribbean parents had of teachers. The effects of African-Caribbean parents' attitudes to education were evident in the educational aspirations and outcomes of African-Caribbean young women in a study on cigarette smoking (Douglas, 2015). Many parents held the British educational system in high esteem and expected their children to do well. What they were not prepared for was the racism that their children suffered at the hands of racist teachers and a discriminatory education system.

African-Caribbean young women in the UK: education and schooling

In terms of education, Caribbean girls achieve much better educational outcomes than their black male counterparts, but less than those of their white female counterparts. For example, in 2006, 62% of white girls gained five or more GCSEs at grade A* to C compared to 52.4% of Caribbean girls and only 35.9% of Caribbean boys (DfES, 2007). Although the overall attainment for Black Caribbean pupils increased from 34% in 2006/07 to 48.6% in 2011, the gender gap in educational attainment

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between Black Caribbean boys and girls was even greater: 12.5% compared with a national gender gap of 7.3% (Runnymede Trust, 2012).

Early research on young black people focused on social problems associated with young black men: overrepresentation in penal institutions (Cashmore and McGlaughlin, 1990), underachievement in education and youth employment. The first glimmer of interest in the lives of African-Caribbean young women was in the field of the sociology of education (Driver, 1979; Fuller, 1980; Mirza, 1992; Wright, 2005). Here the focus was on educational achievement (Mirza, 1992) and on school exclusions (Wright et al, 2000). Research on education conducted in the 1970s initially explored African-Caribbean young people and educational attainment and was not gendered. African-Caribbean young people were seen as underachievers and culturally and intellectually inferior. A small-scale study conducted by Geoffrey Driver (1979) demonstrated that despite low teacher expectations and the young people's experience of racism in the school system, black girls seemed to outperform all other pupils and their performance was in stark contrast to that of their black male peers. Driver's work was methodologically flawed as it attempted to generalise from a small-scale study to the whole of the UK and it was the object of a vitriolic attack by black parents' groups as it seemed to cut at right angles to the concerns that black communities were raising about the plight of their children within the British education system. However, the concerns of black parents led to the setting up of the Rampton Committee (HMSO, 1981), which examined the experiences of African-Caribbean children in mainstream education.

Driver's findings were supported by the findings of an ethnographic research study undertaken by Mary Fuller (1980) in a London comprehensive school. This research made it clear that in the multiracial schools in which the work took place, white staff had a racist view of the capabilities of young black children and did not expect black children to do well. Faced with the same problematic, the schooling identities that were taken up by black girls and black boys were different. The girls, while opposing and resisting their treatment, ensured that they did not invoke disciplinary procedures. So incensed were they by the racialised injustices that framed their interaction with white teachers and the school, that oppositional responses were engendered and their desire to achieve academically was magnified. On the other hand, black boys resisted and found themselves subject to disciplinary challenges. They developed a counter-school culture that involved rejection of educational qualifications and celebrated and presented a black 'style'.

Heidi Mirza's work built on these foundations. Twelve years later in a much more expansive study on young African-Caribbean women, educational aspiration and self-esteem, Mirza (1992) demonstrated that young black women had a more positive self-image than both their white counterparts and young black men. Mirza also demonstrated that young black women did better in their final examinations than their male peers. She argued that further exploration of the identity of young black women was needed and she deconstructed the ideology of 'strong black women' and the suggestion that black women possessed internal strengths that accounted for their endurance

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and ability to overcome the structural racism and sexism they face in school, the workplace and at home.

Social identities of black girls

There has been limited research on social identity and the experience of black girls in Britain. Amos and Parmar, writing from a Black British feminist perspective (1981), suggested:

... most existing literature which seeks to articulate the experience of black girls begins from a racist standpoint, denying the autonomy of a black culture and trying instead to integrate the experience of black people into more general discussions about life in Britain. On the other hand, token attempts have been made within feminist writing to include material on black girls but this serves only to add 'cross-cultural' spice to predominantly ethnocentric work. (Amos and Parmar, 1981: 129)

In the 1990s, cultural studies researchers focused on ways in which culture influenced identity. As outlined previously, identity is not only influenced by gender and 'race', but also culture and history. Culture is not fixed. Hall (1990) drew attention to the ways in which cultural identities constantly evolve:

Cultural identity ... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past... Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything else which is historical they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power. (Hall, 1990: 225)

Phoenix (1997: 12) argues that categories such as girl and boy 'are differentiated by "race", culture, social class, sexuality as well as by personal experiences and desires. Masculinities and femininities are, thus, plural - racialised, ethnicised and always expressed through a social class position'. In addition, Jenkins (2004) argues that identities are socially constructed and are part of a process of 'becoming'. Hence identity is not fixed. He further argues that identity is in fact a meta-concept that makes as much sense collectively as individually: 'One's identity - one's identities indeed, for who we are is always singular and plural - is never a final or settled matter' Jenkins, 2004: 5).

One of the enduring debates in relation to identity and identities is the role of agency versus structure. To what extent are individuals free to choose their own identities and to what extent is identity determined by existing social structures such as class, 'race', ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability and disability? In some ways a modernist notion of identity - one that sees identity as determined by social class, 'race', ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and as fairly fixed - stands in stark contrast to postmodern notions of identity as mutable, changing, fluid and contingent on time and place.

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Identities of young African-Caribbean women

In exploring the identities of African-Caribbean young women, it is important to recognise that identity is influenced by 'race', ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and the oppression that is associated with these factors through power relationships in society, while acknowledging that identity is not fixed but changing and fluid. Hence, rather than regarding agency and structure as polar binaries, a framework is now presented that incorporates agency and structure in a complementary rather than oppositional way. An intersectional approach can do this (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Collins, 1990) by recognising the simultaneous influence of 'race', gender and ethnicity and the impact of these on social structures and axes of oppression. Research informed by black feminist perspectives in particular is concerned with power relations, racialised boundaries and the lived realities of black women, and is directly related to intersectional theory.

Intersectionality theory was developed by African-American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in response to second-wave feminism that privileged gender but did not give significance to 'race' or ethnicity. McCall (2005: 1771) argues that intersectionality 'is the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far'. An intersectional approach considers the intersecting axes of oppression and discrimination that cut across each other and may influence and change each other (Hankivsky and Christoffersen, 2008). Mirza talks of the notion of 'embodied intersectionality', which refers to the lived experiences of black women (Mirza, 2009).

As is evident from the other studies, the notion of a fixed African-Caribbean identity is contested (Phoenix, 1997). The identities of African-Caribbean young women are fractured, fluid, multiple, shifting and contingent on time and location and context (Bradley, 1996). Identities are also relational - influenced by family, friends and peers - and an individual's identity is perceived in relation to other identities. On the one hand, young African-Caribbean women's identities are uncertain and contested and yet at the same time they are located in and informed and shaped by a sense of being part of a wider Caribbean diaspora (Reynolds, 2006a). Thus the identities of African-Caribbean young women in Britain are influenced by the historical experiences of slavery and migration of their forebears as well as their current experience of disadvantage, racism and discrimination.

There is a literature around diasporic identities that is beginning to focus on young people's identities. Within this literature there is a focus on the identities of African-Caribbean young women (Reynolds, 2004, 2006a, 2006b). Tracey Reynolds and colleagues have explored young people's diasporic identities and their relationship to social capital (Goulbourne, 2006). Reynolds (2006a) argues that the ways in which Caribbean young people understand and conceptualise their identities is complex, sometimes contradictory and changes depending on context and location. Based on research conducted in 2003/04 and involving in-depth individual interviews with 30 second- and third-generation Caribbean young people in London (mainly), Nottingham, Birmingham and Manchester, aged between 16 and 30 years old, Reynolds remarked:

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Young people's accounts illustrate that ethnic identity is fluid and mutable. Constructing ethnic identity involves a continual renegotiation of identities and encompasses myriad situations and social resources – transnational family networks, community, regional and diasporic racial connections - that the young people draw upon and utilise in different social contexts. (Reynolds, 2006c: 1099)

In addition to Caribbean diasporic connections, identities of young African-Caribbean people are shaped by black urban youth identity and its articulation through gender and social class. There is a growing body of literature on black youth culture (Mirza, 1993; Alexander, 1996; Back, 1996) that suggests that US rap/ hip-hop and reggae music have had a significant impact on black youth culture. Reynolds (2006b) argues that the connection that young people make with the black diaspora in the Caribbean and the US influences patterns of cultural consumption, and influences and pressurises young Caribbean men and women to conform to images of black youth identity in terms of speech (stylised Jamaican patois) and dress. In this regard, young African-Caribbean people are sometimes perceived as 'style icons' by young people from other ethnic groups. Reynolds argues that Caribbean young people may establish cross-ethnic networks, relationships and alliances and hence utilise 'bridging social capital'. They are thus able to create and develop multiple ethnic identities exhibiting 'cultural hybridity' and 'cultural syncretism' (Ali, 2003). In relation to Caribbean identities, young people on the one hand homogenise Caribbean cultural identities (that is, geographical difference, differences in patterns of migration and social class differences), but on the other hand they are also very aware of island and national differences when networking with family members and in kinship networks (Reynolds, 2006a, 2006b).

Reynolds (2004, 2006a, 2006b) argues that African-Caribbean young people have a homogenising discourse - constructing a homogenous African-Caribbean identity - and that they are also aware of the differences within Caribbean communities, in terms of those people born in the UK and those born in the Caribbean, and also in terms of differences between Caribbean countries. African-Caribbean culture is often viewed as static and essentialised, and Reynolds' findings challenge this notion. Reynolds' research provides many opportunities to further develop the theoretical and conceptual framework to understand the identities of young Caribbean women in the UK and she discusses the importance of bonding social capital within Caribbean communities (Reynolds, 2006c).

Young African-Caribbean people's style - that is, the way they dress and speak - may offer them a form of symbolic capital in school. This relates to the way in which black urban style is reproduced and copied by young people from a range of ethnic groups. Thus in school, young African-Caribbean people, both young men and young women, may occupy positions of high status in relation to other young people. In school it may mean that certain aspects of academic achievement become more difficult to obtain as the urban style that young black people adopt, while it provides symbolic capital with their peers, leads to being labelled in negative ways by their teachers. However, this status may be less important as young African-Caribbean people make the transition from youth to adulthood,

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where their 'style' may be seen as negative by prospective employers and colleges and where they may encounter increasing racism.

Altogether, this literature suggests that African- Caribbean young women construct their identities in a number of ways: in terms of their day-to- day experiences, through the experiences of their friends and family, memories of the Caribbean from family members and the wider diaspora, and also imagined and reimagined constructions of the Caribbean and Caribbean communities. Rattansi and Phoenix (2005) argue that there is a need to understand the significance of families in young people's lives and the importance of everyday activities in the construction of their identities.

Friendship networks and relationships are significant for all young women and are acknowledged to influence behaviour and identity. Gilligan (1995) argues that for the development of identity in young women, relationships with other young women, young people, and immediate and extended family are important and central. Hence, identity is relational and influenced by family, friends and peers. Reynolds (2006a), remarking on the friendship networks of Caribbean young people, posits that Caribbean young people have friends from across a range of ethnic groups while they are in primary school, but when they move to secondary school, Caribbean parents attempt to dissuade their children from associating with white working-class children. In a study on girls' friendships, George (2007), commenting on the friendship networks of black girls at a secondary school in London, stated:

During these first two years at secondary school the shifting and constantly changing nature of Shumi's identity contributed to a more heightened awareness of her position as a black girl within the institution of the school. Shumi and her friends claimed that they were no longer able to be 'just individuals' but now subscribed to a collective embracing of their 'black identity'. ... For Shumi and her friends, identity politics often took precedence over friendship with their friendship group functioning to support each other in achieving academic success within an environment they perceived as hostile this group of girls expressed a high degree of racial consciousness and their friendship operated through a 'collective', affirming for each other their affiliation to their African- Caribbean community and also a commitment to academic success. (George, 2007: 123)

These findings were supported by the work of Reynolds (2007), who reported that although Caribbean young people had friendship networks that spanned diverse ethnic groups, the majority of Caribbean young people had best friends from the same ethnic group. 'It was these friends that most strongly matched the values associated with social capital, such as trust, reciprocity, emotional support, community, and identity' (Reynolds, 2007: 384).

In the academic research literature, African-Caribbean young women tend to be depicted in contradictory ways. On the one hand, in the health and social care literature, they are constructed as prematurely sexually active, as young mothers and as lone parents (who themselves come from lone parent, dysfunctional families), and on the other hand, in the sociology of education literature, as

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high academic achievers who, compared with African-Caribbean boys, are less likely to be excluded from school. So African-Caribbean young women are constructed as rebellious and as rule breakers in some literature and yet at the same time as possessors of educational desire and attainment in others. All this suggests the importance of using an intersectional approach that recognises and acknowledges the ways in which young black women are differently positioned from young white women and should inform the practice of practitioners working with young black women.

Conclusion

Practitioners working in health, social care, education and youth work need to understand the complexity of the lives and identities of young black women. The aim of this chapter has not been to homogenise or to essentialise young black women, but to encourage a critical approach. Recognition of regional differences, ethnic differences, cultural differences, social class differences, and differences in sexuality and sexual orientation are important when taking an intersectional approach.

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