

ANN PHOENIX

The Afro-Caribbean myth

The discussion of racial problems in Britain is permeated with assumptions about the Afro-Caribbean family which are quite unjustified and untested.



The term Afro-Caribbean refers to those originally of African origin whose most recent ancestry is in the Caribbean. The Caribbean region stretches for 1,500 miles and includes dozens of islands as well as the South American country of Guyana. People of Afro-Caribbean origin who live in Britain come predominantly from the English-speaking Caribbean, but there is a great deal of variation in the cultural composition between the countries from which they come. In many islands, for example, there is a sizeable Asian-Caribbean as well as Afro-Caribbean population.

Many people who emigrated from the Caribbean to Britain had never before met other islanders. What Afro-Caribbean families in Britain have in common must partly be the result of interactions between people from different Caribbean countries in Britain. This is illustrated by the way in which young Afro-Caribbean people's informal language contains elements of Caribbean creole and English dialects. The Caribbean itself does not provide opportunities for such general exchanges.

The term "Afro-Caribbean" is itself problematic. It suggests birth in, and direct experience of, the Caribbean. Yet increasingly strict immigration controls have led to a decrease in the proportion of people of Afro-Caribbean origin who were actually born in the Caribbean. Over half of all Afro-Caribbean people are now not only British citizens, but British born. In the under-twenties age group, virtually all those of Afro-Caribbean origin (over 90 per cent) have been born in Britain. Thus the term "Afro-Caribbean" may tend to perpetuate the myth that people of Afro-Caribbean origin are outsiders in British society and "do not belong here."

There is also an increasing number of those whose claim to Afro-Caribbean origin comes from one, rather than two parents. In the under-thirties age group, nearly a third of Afro-Caribbeans are married to or cohabiting with white partners. Except the under-thirties (which are fairly evenly balanced for gender), many more Afro-Caribbean men than women are in such unions. (There are no figures for mixed couples who have children but do not live together.) A significant proportion of the families that Afro-Caribbean people form therefore contain those who have no Caribbean heritage at all. Little is known about these families.

"The Afro-Caribbean family" is discussed within British society as if it is uniformly working class. Yet despite their invisibility in popular and academic discourse, there are middle class Afro-Caribbean families in Britain. They share experiences of racism with black people from all classes. But their attitudes and lifestyles are likely to differ from those of working class Afro-Caribbeans. Indeed, black families and white families of similar class positions are likely to share features of their lifestyles.

However, there is evidence that the correlates of class differ according to whether people are black or white. For example, black people in manual jobs are on average better educationally qualified than white people in similar jobs. This is largely because black people cannot get jobs appropriate to their level of qualifications.

Black families of Afro-Caribbean origin live in various forms of household organisation. Just as "the family" is an inadequate term for the description of the different circumstances in which white people live, so is "the Afro-Caribbean family" inadequate. Let us turn now to a consideration of what is known about black British families of Afro-Caribbean origin.

By comparison with what is known about white

households, little is known about black households. There are detailed ethnographic studies of the ways in which Asian households conduct their daily lives, but Afro-Caribbean households have not been studied in the same way, and indeed have been excluded from the study of "normal" developmental processes.

There is also little demographic data about Afro-Caribbean families. In this, Britain differs markedly from the USA, where social statistics are routinely collected and presented broken down for colour and/or ethnicity. Piecemeal information about British Afro-Caribbean families comes from surveys such as the General Household Survey and the Labour Force Survey. In such national surveys the number of black people is relatively small. Less than 5 per cent of the British population is black, and there are roughly half as many people of Afro-Caribbean origin as of Asian origin. In addition, black people are mainly concentrated in urban areas (especially London), rather than evenly distributed throughout the country. In 1982, the Policy Studies Institute surveyed a large, representative sample of black people in Britain. Their report provides the best available picture of Afro-Caribbean families in Britain.

Two of the most widely believed characteristics of the "Afro-Caribbean" family in modern Britain for which there is some evidence are that, first, it tends to be "single parent." Second, that Afro-Caribbean mothers tend to be employed outside the home while their children are young. In many discussions of Afro-Caribbeans in Britain these features are reported to produce many of the ills of the "black community." Thus the violence of West Indian (male) youth, the underachievement of West Indian children and reportedly high rates of "teenage motherhood" have all been attributed to the deviant family organisation of the West Indian family.

It is, however, inaccurate to suggest that most Afro-Caribbean households are single-parent ones, although the proportion of single Afro-Caribbean parents is high in comparison with the proportion of white and Asian single parents. In the 1982 PSI survey, only 10 per cent of white households with children under 16 years of age and 5 per cent of Asian households were headed by a lone parent, compared with 31 per cent of Afro-Caribbean households. This is a sizeable enough proportion to be frowned upon in a society where marriage and motherhood are meant to be inextricably linked. Yet the majority of Afro-Caribbean households with children do contain two parents.

The difference between Afro-Caribbean parents and white parents may be decreasing. Between 1974 and 1982 the proportion of lone-parent households of Afro-Caribbean origin increased from one in six to one in three. But there has been a dramatic rise in the proportion of all children (black and white) born to single, rather than legally married, mothers. In the under-twenties age group, women who have children are now more likely to be single than to be married. Nor is it the case that women are cohabiting but not entering legal marriage. A substantial proportion of single mothers do not live with their child's father when they give birth.

In academic and journalistic articles, childbearing patterns in the Caribbean are discussed as if they illustrate that single motherhood is the accepted cultural practice of Afro-Caribbean people. Afro-Caribbean parents are therefore assumed to be culturally predisposed to have children without the commitment of marriage. In the Caribbean, however, patterns of marriage vary according to class and

Ann Phoenix works at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, London.

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Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: race and racism in 70s Britain* (Hutchinson, London; 1982)

P. Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (Hutchinson, London; 1987)

B. Tizard, P. Blatchford, J. Burke, C. Farquhar and I. Plewis, *Young Children at School in the Inner City* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, London; 1988)



whether people live in urban or rural areas. In Britain, too, there are class differences and regional differences in whether and when people are likely to marry.

It is not really surprising that structural factors (like class and region) influence the pattern of marriage. "The family" constructed in western-dominant ideologies is expected to fulfil important economic functions: men are expected to make adequate economic provision for their wives and children, while women stay at home caring for children. Yet researchers have found that women married to, or cohabiting with, men who are unemployed or who earn little, make economic gains from separation, because of the greater control of household resources that being single gives them.

In various studies, married mothers have been found to fare better economically than single mothers. Debates about the "feminisation of poverty" have gained impetus from this. Yet evidence that economic factors influence whether or not couples marry and whether marriages last casts doubt on interpretations which suggest that marriage is in itself economically beneficial to women. It seems

more plausible that many of those women who do not marry the men with whom they have children would not be economically better off if they did marry them. Since we know that young black men are rather more likely than young white men to be unemployed and to work in poorly paid occupations it is not surprising that Afro-Caribbean women (who predominantly marry Afro-Caribbean men) are less likely to marry than their white peers.

It is wrong to suggest that Afro-Caribbean women become single parents simply because it is their custom so to do. In fact, most either do legally marry or cohabit when they have children. Anyway, most Afro-Caribbean women of childbearing age are either British born or have lived most of their lives in Britain, and it is surely unrealistic to suggest that they are more influenced by historical patterns of behaviour in the Caribbean than by their daily experience of life in Britain.

But does single parenthood have undesirable consequences for Afro-Caribbean children? It is undoubtedly true that Afro-Caribbean children's lack of educational attainment leaves a great deal to be desired. It is also true that most of the young people

who have taken part in the urban riots of the 1980s have been males of Afro-Caribbean origin. Does single parenthood cause these outcomes?

Since the majority of children of Afro-Caribbean origin grow up in households with (at least for some period) two parents their lack of educational qualifications cannot all be due to single parenting. Research (to be published later this year) from the Thomas Coram Research Unit showed no differences in achievement between children of similar social class whose parents were married and those with single parents.

Neither are Afro-Caribbean children the only minority group to do poorly at school. Other groups which are less likely to have single-parent households than Afro-Caribbean families fare equally badly at school (see the *NEW SOCIETY* article by Bhikhu Parekh, 21 August). In any case, it is reasonable to assume that schools and teachers have some effect on the progress children make. Coming from a single-parent household is not sufficient explanation of why children of Afro-Caribbean origin do badly at school.

The riots in the 1980s have been treated by many people as an indication of young black people's criminality and proclivity for violence. It is within the family that children are supposed to learn self-discipline and self-regulation so that there is little need for the exercise of overt social control. Chil-

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dren and young adults who are seen to be out of control are presumed to have parents who have failed to socialise them properly.

Yet in each instance of large-scale street violence involving young black people it has been possible to identify a specific cause as well as more general ones; like racial discrimination and anger at policing tactics. None of these causes has anything to do with Afro-Caribbean family organisation. They relate to the ways in which race, class and gender intersect in British society to ensure that black people are maintained in positions of relative powerlessness. Young black males are particularly the objects of police attention as the possible perpetrators of "muggings" and other crimes.

Afro-Caribbean families violate dominant ideological assumptions about the correct situation in which to have children in another way. Black women of Afro-Caribbean origin are much more likely to be employed than their Asian or white counterparts. The *PSI* survey found that twice as many black women (41 per cent) of Afro-Caribbean origin were employed in 1982 as were white or Asian women. The majority of Afro-Caribbean women of childbearing years were actually employed.

In contrast, Afro-Caribbean men (and presumably Afro-Caribbean fathers) were twice as likely to be unemployed as white men, but only slightly more likely than Asian men.

In the first of this current series on the modern family, Judy Dunn pointed out that the numbers of employed mothers with young children are steadily increasing, and that care away from mothers need not be damaging to children. Afro-Caribbean mothers are not, therefore, likely to harm their children simply by virtue of being employed. And white mothers are increasingly behaving like black Afro-Caribbean mothers in seeking employment while their children are young.

Possible difficulties may arise from the type of care that black parents are able to arrange for their young children. There is a general lack of childcare provision in Britain. Because more Afro-Caribbean mothers than white mothers are employed, they need more childcare facilities, and are likely to suffer worse from poor provision. In a society where racism is an important structural determinant, black people are frequently in poorly paid jobs with the least flexible hours. They have been found to be more reliant on the flexible childcare that child-minders can provide than on day nurseries. If they were simply to leave the labour market and stay at home with their children their families would substitute problems of increased poverty for problems of childcare. Both sets of problems are damaging to children.

There are other aspects of the negative social construction of Afro-Caribbean families for which little evidence is available. For example, Afro-Caribbean parents' style of parenting is reputed to be inadequate, and to cause intergenerational conflict with adolescent children. Unsubstantiated beliefs that inadequate West Indian parents produce inadequate and delinquent West Indian youth permeate journalistic and academic discourses (see *The Empire Strikes Back* and *There ain't no Black in the Union Jack*).

The negative social construction of Afro-Caribbean families serves to maintain the political and social status quo by making causal links between the problems that black people face in Britain within "the Afro-Caribbean family." The characterisation of the Afro-Caribbean family as if it is homogeneous and different from "the British family" serves to legitimate a view of "West Indians" as alien to Britain and British lifestyles.

This obscures the many commonalities between young black people and young white people who go to the same schools and live in the same locality. Indeed, the difference between black people and white people is not only decreasing for rates of single motherhood and maternal employment, but also for the average number of children women have. In 1971, Caribbean-born women gave birth to an average of 3.3 children (compared with 2.3 for UK born women). By 1986, this had sharply reduced and was almost identical with the figure for UK-born women (1.8 and 1.7 respectively).

In a society permeated with racism, experiences of and attitudes to racism separate black people from white people and give black people from diverse backgrounds a common cause. It is only possible, however, to gain a good understanding of families of Afro-Caribbean origin by considering the social and structural contexts in which they currently live. Those social contexts are specific to class, gender and generation as well as "race." Afro-Caribbean families are therefore represented in every possible category of family.