1. Black young people in the UK: charting the tensions of relativism and dogmatism in social service praxis

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Introduction

The term "black" is used in this article in a sense derived from the political context of the United Kingdom (UK), signifying people of African, African-Caribbean, Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani descent. The present situation of many black people in the UK is dismal, involving socioeconomic disadvantage in all facets of life including housing, education, employment, health, criminal justice and equality of opportunity or the lack of it (Sallah 2005; Dacombe and Sallah, 2006). Institutional racism is both a cause and consequence of these disadvantages, and this article examines how this seeps into child-rearing practices. The polarisation of two extremes in praxis: cultural relativism and dogmatism, is often to the detriment of black children, sometimes fatally, as in the case of Victoria Climbie.[1]

The central argument of this chapter is that black people in the UK sometimes have a different reality from the practitioners who intervene in their lives, and the practitioner's response in service provision is sometimes (fatally) dogmatic or relativist. Mainly based on research I conducted before 2005, this paper looks at influences in the formation of black parents' realities and the location of the child in the child-rearing process. These findings are then juxtaposed with the praxis of those who intervene with statutory authority – mainly social workers – and how their construction of reality greatly affects how they work with black children and young people.

This was predominantly a qualitative study conducted across five counties in England. The first part involved semi-structured, individual interviews with 25 parents of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, African-Caribbean and African origins with children between the ages of 12 and 16 living in the UK. The second part involved group interviews with 41 young people mainly between 12 and 16 years of age. There were seven group interviews across the five ethnic groups that constitute the black community as well as individually self-administered questionnaires. The research findings were centred on themes of reward and sanction: black people's perceptions of and experiences with social services; the way black parents were brought up in comparison to the way they bring up their children; and the boundary between abuse and discipline. This chapter will focus on the second theme: black

people's perceptions of and experiences with social services and how mainstream practitioners engage with or intervene in young black people's lives.

Influences in the formation of parents' concepts of reality

Each and every person has a way of looking at the world – what Berger and Luckmann (1966) refer to as a "symbolic universe" – and of applying meaning and significance to events, experiences and situations. These accumulated layers form the "consciousness" of the individual, and become the basis of their interactions with the rest of the world in deciding what is right and wrong, fair or foul, just or unjust. It is the basis by which we interpret and attach meaning to our interaction, like a pair of spectacles through which we view the world and engage with it. This process of "human meaning making" (Rogers, 1989, p. 26) illustrates how our concept of reality determines our actions and reactions. Black parents' experiences are to a large extent influenced and determined by a multiplicity of obvious factors including upbringing, religion, culture, community influences, spouses and the media, but also by different things from that of mainstream society, including the legacies of colonialism, immigration, and discrimination.

Any consideration of the mass "exodus" of black people into Babylon[2] suggests the movement of different cultures and, as a part of this, different child-rearing practices. In order to contextualise and approach practitioners' interventions in the cultural fabric of black families, we need to acknowledge that this cultural situation immediately raises philosophical questions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, and positions ranging from forms of cultural relativism to dogmatism engaged by questions of marriage practices, Islamic dress and female circumcision/genital mutilation. These kinds of issues have been placed at the centre of equality and British social policy debates, particularly in a period of multiculturalism and reactive "community cohesion" initiatives (Dacombe and Sallah, 2006), and a more recent emphasis on "integration".[3]

In interviews, a number of parents argued that mainstream society refuses to recognise their cultural differences, especially in child-rearing, and that when this involves service provision, it is tantamount to institutionalised racism. On the other hand, some parents countered that the cultural dynamics of "second and third generation immigrants" contribute to frozen, "time warp" cultural practices, including parenting practices. From my perspective, a cause of concern is the young people trapped by intensely held views, and occupying positions between mainstream culture, black culture and the youth subculture. Young people here have to go through the processes of "racial socialisation" (Peters, 1985) and "triple consciousness" (Boykin and Toms, 1985). This sometimes means that young people become versatile and adapt by adopting different cultural roles depending on whether they are at school, in the streets "chilling" with their mates or at home. Yet some young people may not be able to negotiate the boundaries of these different cultures, in a number of cases leading to identity crises or significantly affected self-esteem.

Black children's different realities

These cultural dynamics can be analysed in parental perspectives on the strictness of their own upbringing. Most parents – who were either brought up in the UK or in their countries of origin – had a far stricter upbringing than they presently exercise

with their children, indeed some would argue that the sanction methods used with them were nothing less than child abuse by today's standards. In some parents' countries of origin, challenging parental authority is the gravest misdemeanour that can be committed, because it is not just an affront to the individual parent but to the family as an institution of the community. Therefore some parents recall being severely beaten, or even denied food, to drive home the message that the home was not a democracy but an autocracy where the parent had supreme power, and made all decisions unquestionably for the good of the family.

This is in contrast to mainstream social assumptions of the child as an individual with an emphasis on his or her entrenched rights. Such a child-centred approach entails a Eurocentric concept of self as "a cognitive and emotional universe, the centre of awareness, emotion, judgement and action" (Landrine, 1992, p. 403). It assumes that all actions emanate from and must be directed towards satisfying the self, it is in effect the basis of reference, what Landrine calls the "referential self" (1992, p. 403):

> "The referential self of Western culture is construed as an autonomous entity defined by its distinctiveness and separateness from the natural and social world. It is construed to be a unit, a region, a universe unto itself that is inviolate, protected within the body and, a priori, free. In other words, the referential self is presumed to be a free agent – to be an agent that does what it wishes. Thereby the self has rights – the right to privacy, autonomy and to be protected from intrusions from others being foremost among these. Thus the failure of the family to respect the privacy and autonomy of its members is defined as a type of family pathology, and various family members are construed as enmeshed, victimised, domineering, smothering and the like." (Landrine 1992, p. 404)

As opposed to the referential self, the collective (Owusu-Bempah, 1998) or the indexical (Gaines, 1982; Landrine, 1992) self works from a sociocentric perspective that posits no omnipotent self in the collective, but as part of a network where every individual sees herself as indexed to others, a link in the chain whose every intention is to make the wheel move. In the upbringing of respondent parents, the needs of the extended family and the community were primary to the needs of the self, as opposed to the present condition where the self is primary to everything else. For many parents, this is a key factor responsible for the "inter-generational conflict" summarised in the diagram below:

Figure 1: Causes of inter-generational conflict in black families

implementations, ambiguities, possibilities
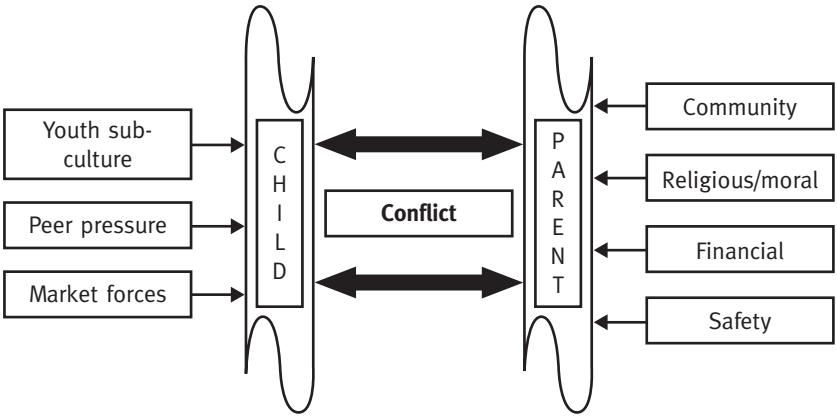
The place of the child in upbringing

Throughout this research, it has been apparent that the reward and sanctions system applied in households is defined by either sociocentric or Eurocentric approaches, with a question of cardinal significance being the future role parents expect their children to play in society. Is the emphasis on the individual or the collective role? If it is the former then the focus is on developing the child to recognise his or her individual needs and rights and to pursue them actively. On the other hand, the latter implies bringing up the child to be part of a community and to learn to put family and community needs first, hence the African saying that "it takes a whole village to raise a child". This effectively determines the place the child is allowed to take from a young age.

A significant number of respondents were very clear that the child "is an extension of me" and not a separate individual. In other words, the child is not seen as a separate entity endowed with superseding individual rights; inherent in this thinking is that such "individualism" is subordinate to the needs of the immediate family, extended family and community. An implication of this is that any outside intervention – especially from social services – is seen as an attempt to interfere in the family's symbiotic processes, and is often resisted and rejected with hostility. This often ends up in a lack of co-operation with social services and a sense of disempowerment for black parents.

A significant number of parents stated that the restrictions placed on them by social services demonstrated disrespect for their child-rearing practices; perhaps the following parent encapsulates this view:

> "You can only extend your discipline or your punishment to a level that is deemed to be acceptable in society and not beyond that and I find that a challenging area in the sense that society is OK to treat a community differently because of its culture, its faith or its language and say that you have to be culturally sensitive to the Sikh community and the Muslim community because of these traditions that they have, so it's OK to be culturally sensitive to them but when it comes to those communities wanting to extend their culture and pass on their cultural values to the next generation then that sensitivity or that acknowledgement of their culture is curtailed by saying well you can only chastise in this way and not in any other way."
> (Interview with British parent of Indian origin)

This view has been consistently expressed throughout the research by a majority of parents: practitioners, such as teachers and social workers, who deal with their children on a face-to-face basis, often do not know enough about the cultural background of a child to make a fair judgment in the best interest of the child. Here two examples come to mind; one is that of a parent having problems with her daughter, as a result of which they attended a conference meeting at which the child was deemed abusive and disruptive. The parent explains:

> "She was mouthing, I thought shamefully, she was mouthing and I said to her 'be quiet'.
> 'No, why should I be quiet?'
> And I said to her, 'Taniqua,[4] the only thing left for me to do is to slap you' and the woman (social worker) said 'if you slap her, I would put you in jail' and from then she's used that ... against me because the social services' woman sat there in front

of her and said if you slap her I'm sorry you are the one who is going to be put in jail. She hadn't heard the story, she hadn't heard my problems, she hadn't heard my depression, she hadn't heard nothing and that's the first thing she said and that's what Taniqua uses: 'If you hit me, I'm gonna phone social services'." (Interview with British parent of Caribbean origin)

The second incident involved a pastor who was invited from Zimbabwe to come and preach in England and came along with his wife and daughter. His teenage daughter started returning home late thereby breaking the sacred rules of the house. Both mum and dad beat the child, as a result of which the child was taken into care and the parents sent back home. How do these interventions relate to the cultural context of child-rearing? In the first story involving Taniqua and her mum, the social worker might not have known that the worst thing you can do in most black cultures is to swear in front of one's parents, particularly in public. As a result, the mother wanted to use what over half of black parents in the research found acceptable, a slap, which the social worker disqualified while undermining the authority of the parent in front of the child.[5] The second story involves a household where children have clearly defined rules to play within and clear boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not. In breaking these rules, in the view of the parents, the daughter suggested to the community that the pastor was not in control of his family, thus undermining his role in that community. In the social service's intervention, the cultural values as well as the influence of the community were not considered. This argument does not aim to condone such physical cruelty or chastisement, but instead to underline the need to locate children culturally. As Maitra explains:

> "If early environments are so different across cultures it may well be that the infant's sense of itself, its feelings, attributions of meaning and so on, may not proceed in similar fashion in all cultures, nor result in universal configurations of the adult self." (Maitra, 1996, p. 290)

Thus the Eurocentric suppositions of the intervention, we can argue, are embedded structurally in the relationships institutionalised between mainstream agencies and minorities, or as Maitra puts it, "minority cultural groups (and their professional members) do not have an autonomous existence, and are overseen in their practices towards their children by British laws and British professional expectations" (Maitra, 1996, p. 289). What resonates throughout the research is that social services and associated agencies' intervention do not usually consider the child's role and community expectations. In most cases, they construct the child as an individual entity, dislocated from what constitutes the child's concept of reality:

> "The self includes persons and things that Western clinicians ordinarily construe to be separate from the external to the self; the boundaries to the self are drawn not around an individual but around a 'foyer' (Gaines, 1982) that includes family members, and significant others as part of, and powerful competing voices within, the self. Their desires, their demands are felt as one's own. The self then consists of persons and forces over which the individual has little control. These persons, forces, and immaterial beings, rather than the self, are seen as responsible for the self's actions." (Landrine 1992, p. 407)

This lack of cultural location may negate the role and influence of the extended family, and leaves social services perceived as "those who come to take our children away and destroy our families". Shazia Irfan observes in this context that,

"Trust needs to be built by shifting the balance from child protection intervention to preventative and family support for Asian parents. This can best be achieved by putting resources into Asian voluntary sector organisations" (2004, p. 43). My research would lead me to agree with this in terms of black communities in general, while resisting the suggestion that voluntary sector activity – while not denying the vital and able services black organisations provide – may be seen as a substitute for publicly funded services, especially when British multiculturalism has often led to situations where communities compete for limited amounts of funding.

The fundamental question remains, however, how do we decide on the best interest of the child? Is there a way beyond relativist or dogmatic stances? In a significant number of cases, as we have seen, the cultural context of the child is subordinate to the individual rights of the child. However it is important to note how, in other cases, the rights of the child are disregarded because of cultural ignorance. An extreme example is the death of Victoria Climbie, where cultural relativism is understood to have played a part in allowing her to remain in an abusive and ultimately fatal domestic situation. In general, there is a trend among some white social workers to adopt a cultural relativist approach, whereby professionals shy away from making decisions and justify everything under cultural difference. On the other hand, some black people adopt a dogmatic defence of their culture whereby any attempt to challenge entrenched practices is branded racist. These two opposing views, to put it mildly, endanger the best interests of the child.

What we must strive for is an environment where white professionals feel safe to question and challenge cultural practices without fear of being branded racist. It must also be an environment where white professionals are not culturally dogmatic in their interventions. Relatedly, black professionals must refrain from giving the impression that they are "omnipotent prophets of culture", resulting in all matters involving black children being passed on to them, thereby allowing everyone else to evade it. Everyone involved must take an active interest in dislodging stereotyping and cultural relativism as well as dogmatism.

Critiquing the Eurocentric model of child-rearing

I use the idea of a Eurocentric model to capture how research participants referred to the ways that mainstream society brings up its children and expects them to be brought up. This mainly focuses on child-rearing practices and the demarcation of the child's rights from the parent's responsibilities. A significant number of parents stated that the over-emphasis of the rights and individuality of the child makes it difficult to bring up children "properly". They recounted that children, in their view, disproportionately use "rights talk" instead of the good of the collective. Consequently the potential for conflict is maximised as some social service interventions de-contextualise these tensions in the family over roles and expectations. This, as many parents pointed out, results in a significant number of black children being caught up in the care and legal system. A large number of parents were keen to note that most black young people inserted into the care system end up worse off, as the existing boundaries in most care homes cannot be fully enforced, and even where they are, the focus rests on the rights of the

child. The argument is developed by contending that such young people end up exposed to and involved in drug abuse, prostitution and offending behaviour. The view held by a significant number of parents is that social services' interventions do not often give the parent due regard or take into account the contextual application of sanctions.

Nevertheless, one might question whether or not this a one-sided view which side-steps questions of parental responsibility and the initial reasons for the interventions, as well as the appropriateness and harshness of sanctions and the nature of their disciplinary expectations. As has been demonstrated, most parents experienced a far harder discipline regime than the one they administer, most of which would now be considered abusive. However, this does not remove the tensions between their predominantly "collective approach to the self" and the more fluid movement of young people in and through the youth sub-culture as well as the minority and mainstream cultures. What we recommend then is the rethinking of values and approaches both by social services and black parents, taking into consideration the multicultural dynamics impacting on the young black child.

This involves clarifying the rights of the child – as opposed to the responsibilities of the parent – in a sociocentric setting. These are inextricably linked, therefore the focus should not be on separating the two, but on how they can work together harmoniously. A practical application of this could involve the social services providing clear and simple guidelines to parents on how the rights of children are meant to be complementary to the responsibilities of parents, shifting the balance from intervention to preventation and family support work.

On a similar note, child protection legislation remains highly inaccessible to parents. In my research the overwhelming majority of interviewees had never heard of the 1989 Children Act and were very unclear as to what they can and cannot do. This has very serious implications. Whilst not justifying ignorance as an excuse, the vast majority of research participants struggled with what constitutes abuse. Moreover they also struggled with the concept of "significant harm" from a legal mainstream perspective. Again the use of simple and accessible guidelines, given from an informal angle through national children's charities like NSPCC, community associations and voluntary organisations, might greatly help to demystify child protection for a large number of black parents.

A constant issue raised during the research was that of parent abuse. Both parents and young people have gone to great lengths to explain how some parents are on the receiving end of abuse from their children. This is mainly due to parents being afraid of the law or not knowing enough about child protection legislation. Other parents, however, find themselves incapable of dealing with parenting in Britain and adapting to their new environment, making them vulnerable to abuse from their children. Restricted social mobility, in some cases not being able to speak English well, and not knowing one's "way around the system" make it very difficult for some newly arrived parents (especially when they feel that their children could manipulate the system). This issue evoked emotive discussions and requires further investigation in the future.

Differences within black culture concerning discipline

Figure 2: Diagram showing the different stages of verbal admonition
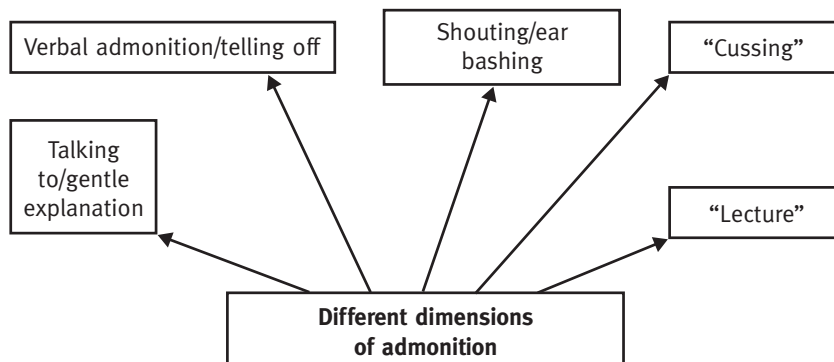
The variations shown in the diagram instigated disagreement among young people about appropriateness. The African group of young people did not like the "lecture" variant of verbal admonition – denoting a serious dressing down – and thought that its effect could have serious consequences. On the other hand, the African-Caribbean group saw nothing wrong with being "cussed" by their parents; it was viewed as an acceptable means of discipline. Obviously this illustrates the absurdity of assuming that all black people have exactly the same cultural understanding, but also that these differences can be of huge significance, as the case of Victoria Climbie illustrates (Owusu-Bempah, 2003). In this case, there is a strong belief that the caseworker assigned to Victoria Climbie's case was assigned because of her colour; the case social worker was from the Caribbean, Victoria Climbie from the Ivory Coast, and the two countries of origin have significant differences in child-rearing. Despite this, the assignment pointed to an assumption that black culture is the same and that any black person can competently deal with any black cultural issue. As Owusu-Bempah points out:

> "In her evidence to the same enquiry, the black key social worker admitted that she did not even know that Victoria hailed from the Ivory Coast, West Africa… she accepted also that it was poor judgement to equate her own experience, the experience of an African-Caribbean person born and living in England with that of a French-speaking African girl who had been brought up in the Ivory Coast." (Owusu-Bempah, 2003, p. 56)

This once again brings into focus aspects of cultural relativism and dogmatism. Does the fear of being call racist scare white social workers from challenging accepted or perceived cultural practices that have detrimental effects on the child? As an experienced white social worker told me, he feels "disabled" by the atmosphere of "political correctness" he operates in, as the stigma of being branded a racist can be very uncomfortable. In his critique of political correctness, Owusu-Bempah captures this as well:

> "(White workers) avoid involvement with black clients even where they know that they could be more effective than their black colleagues, or where a case would benefit from their expertise. This is one of the hidden faces of political correctness…" (Owusu-Bempah, 2003, p. 56)

This means that the justification that "it is their culture and they know best" may be a path of least resistance, and to the detriment of the child. In a catalogue of the most high-profile cases involving the abuse of black children from 1973 to 2002 including Maria Colwell in 1973, Jasmine Beckford in 1984, Tyra Henry in 1984, Heidie Koseda in 1984, Kimberley Carlisle in 1986, Doreen Mason in 1987, Leanne White in 1992, Rikki Neave in 1994, Chelsea Brown in 1999, Victoria Climbie in 2002 and Lauren Wright in 2002 (all of which resulted in fatalities), Owusu-Bempah (2003) suggests that political correctness may have been a factor in all of these cases, even though it was only acknowledged in the case of Victoria Climbie and alluded to in the Tyra Henry case.

In this light, we need to consider how to ameliorate this situation. How do we promote a safe environment for white professionals to be able to challenge established or perceived cultural practices that militate against the best interests of the child? At the other culturally dogmatic end of the continuum – where the concept of "the family" is a Eurocentric postulate that negates any other mode of constructing social reality – we encounter insensitivity to the needs of different cultures, and concomitant resistance and even hostility from those at the receiving end. This dogmatic approach is not only adopted by white social workers but sometimes by black social workers as well, as it is centrally a matter of the training of social workers from a Eurocentric perspective embedded in the very structures of society.

Social and childcare workers are by the very nature of their jobs entrusted with making life and death decisions, and therefore the need to train them to a minimally accepted standard of cultural competency is non-negotiable. Social Work, Youth Offending, Probation and Youth Work must urgently and adequately address this imbalance between cultural relativism and dogmatism. What we should hope to achieve, as Poole (1998) and Owusu-Bempah (2003) put it, is cultural competency, which is about:

> "Recognising similarities and differences in the values, norms, customs, history and institutions of groups of people who vary by ethnicity, gender, religion ... culturally competent practitioners understand the impact of discrimination, oppression, and stereotyping on practice. They recognise their own biases towards or against certain cultural groups; they rely on (scientific) evidence and moral reasoning to work effectively in cross cultural situations." (Owusu-Bempah, 2003, p. 60)

Both cultural relativism and dogmatism are dangerous and insensitive stances at extreme ends of the cultural continuum. Conversely, forms of cultural competence sensitive to cultural needs yet grounded in the best interests of the child and accepted standards of child-rearing across cultures are key. This emphasises that cultural competency should not seek to assimilate or operate in two separate cultures that hardly intersect. Similarly, cases should not be assigned to black people because of stereotyped assumptions; instead the training should be sensitive enough to make any social worker competent enough to work across contexts in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-faith Britain.

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Endnotes

1. Victoria died on 25 February 2001 after being abused and tortured to death by her aunt and her aunt's partner. Social services had been informed of Victoria's case since 14 July 1999.

2. Babylon mainly refers to the West but more specifically in this case to the UK.

3. It could be argued that the 7 July 2005 London bombings ushered in a rhetorical and policy shift from "multiculturalism" to integration, with the launch of the Commission for Integration and Cohesion by Ruth Kelly in August 2006. More recently, Jack Straw's October 2006 request for Muslim women to take off their veils in his political constituency meetings and the seemingly calculated nature of the debate he ignited – confirmed shortly after when Tony Blair called for a debate on how the Muslim community "integrates" into mainstream Britain – indicates that the demise of multiculturalism and the new euphemism of "integration" can be interpreted as an attack on equality and a return to assimilationist logics.

4. Fictitious name used to protect the young person's identity.

5. Smacking of children with the excuse of "reasonable chastisement" is still permissible under UK law.