

Lone mothers of mixed racial and ethnic children in Britain: Comparing experiences of social attitudes and support in the 1960s and 2000s

## **Synopsis**

This article places side-by-side the views from lone mothers bringing up children from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds in mid-1960s and early 2000s Britain, to consider whether the sorts of social attitudes and support these mothers experienced have changed or persisted over the past half century. The analysis compares and contrasts the general social and official attitudes that lone mothers of mixed children feel that they encounter, the support they receive from the fathers of their children, and their relationships with their own and the father's wider family, the neighbourhood and friendship networks they draw on, and the formal supports available to them across time. The article concludes by considering some indicative trajectories of change and constancy that looking at these social attitudes and supports reveals, around negative assessments and their social expression, expectations of fathers, the availability of wider family, and the importance of informal daily support from other mothers in the same situation.

## **Introduction**

UK census data indicate that lone parents of children from mixed racial or ethnic backgrounds constitute one of the highest family forms: 45% of dependent children in the 2001 'Mixed' Census ethnic group category live in families that are headed by a lone parent, compared with 25% of those in the 'White' ethnic group. Like other lone parent families in Britain and elsewhere, these are overwhelmingly headed by mothers.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst the inclusion of the 'Mixed' category for the first time in the 2001 UK Census has highlighted the presence of racially and ethnically mixed people and families, their existence is by no means a new phenomenon. Families from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds, including those headed by lone mothers, have long been part of the social fabric of Britain. What is new, however, is the way in which we are beginning to understand these families and their experiences, in particular through drawing on firsthand accounts of mixing and mixedness. A growing body of literature is increasingly identifying the demographics and experiences of children and young people from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds in Britain (Ali, 2003, Barrett et al., 2006, Song and Aspinall, forthcoming, Tikly et al., 2004, Tizard and Phoenix, 2002, Wilson, 1987); it is only recently however that more detailed knowledge about their parents has become known (Caballero et al., 2008). Such research indicates that the demographics and experiences of contemporary parents of children from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds form a varied and complex picture, but nonetheless confirms findings from earlier studies that suggest parents in such families – whether lone or couple – are subject to enduring negative assumptions and stereotypes regarding their backgrounds, relationships and parenting skills (Alibhai-Brown, 2001, Tizard and Phoenix, 2002, Wilson, 1987). Barn, 1999, Twine, 1999a, Twine, 1999b, Twine, 2004 and others, however, have indicated that lone mothers of children from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds may be especially vulnerable to such stereotypes (Harman, 2010a, Harman and Barn, 2005, Katz, 1996, Olumide, 2002, Tyler, 2005).

In this article, we place side-by-side, views from lone mothers bringing up children from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds in mid-1960s and early 2000s Britain, in order to consider whether the sort of social attitudes they face, and the support that the lone mothers experience

from the fathers of their children, their families, their local community, and officials, have changed or persisted over the past half century.

The 1960s are often pointed to as a period when social changes took hold that we are still feeling the effects of today, including shifts in the family forms within which children are brought up, and diversification of some communities with immigration (Edwards, 2009). A number of research studies were carried out during the 1960s as part of concerns about post-war changes in Britain. One of these was a study of 'fatherless families' that we draw on in this article, placing the accounts of lone mothers of children from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds from that time alongside perspectives from contemporary counterparts. We begin by setting the wider scene for the historical comparison of lone mothers' accounts and the material that we draw upon to do this. We then compare and contrast the general social and official attitudes that lone mothers of mixed children feel they encounter, the support they receive from the fathers of their children, and their relationships with their own and the father's wider family, the neighbourhood and friendship networks they draw on, and the formal supports available to them, across time. We conclude by considering some of the indicative trajectories of change and constancy that looking at these attitudes and supports reveals.

### **Lone mothers: 1960s and 2000s**

Mothers bringing up children without a resident man have long been seen as transgressing various boundaries and denoting the state of the nation in some way. The history of lone motherhood in Britain during the twentieth century is characterised by pendulum swings between 'solutions' to the question of whether, in the absence of a resident male breadwinner, these women should earn a living to support themselves and their children, or be supported by the State or by the 'absent' father of their

### **An historical comparison: The research studies**

In order to explore whether and how things may have changed, we draw on in-depth interviews with lone mothers of children from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds from two research projects carried out nearly half a century apart.<sup>2</sup>

### **Social attitudes**

Although mixing between different racial and ethnic groups was common in the 1960s – as indeed it had been throughout and prior to the 20th century – for the most part such mixing was popularly thought of as being something undesirable, especially if it involved white women (Caballero & Aspinall, work-in-progress; Bland, 2005, Bland, 2007). The interviews from 1965/66 reveal how derogatory popular and institutional lines of thought resonated in the lives of the mothers with mixed racial and

### **Support from fathers and families**

Lone mothers of mixed racial and ethnic children are often assumed to have little social contact, with white mothers in particular being abandoned by the children's father, isolated from his family and ostracised by their own. Studies conducted in the 1950s and 1960s on black communities that discussed mixed marriages between West Indian men and white women suggested that these relationships frequently led to the estrangement of the women from their white family and friends (Banton, 1959,

### **Neighbourhood and friendship networks**

The area where lone mothers and their mixed race children live can have an important bearing on their experiences not only in terms of developing a sense of identity and belonging for their children, but also on the everyday lives of the mothers themselves (Head, 2005, Caballero, work-in-progress). Certainly, in the contemporary study, mothers could choose to live in their multicultural Bristol neighbourhood where, as Chloe (described earlier) explains, their children will not 'stand out':

### **Formal support**

In the period between the two studies, considerable shifts have taken place in relation to the formal support available for lone mothers. In addition to changing policy contexts, there are national and local specialist organisations that provide advice, information and support to lone mothers.<sup>7</sup> For mothers in the 1965/66 study, little specific formal support

### **Conclusion**

In this conclusion we highlight some indicative trajectories of change or constancy in circumstances for lone mothers of mixed racial and ethnic children over the past half century. In doing so, we hope to provide a launch point for further discussion and research to develop understandings of the experiences and needs of this diverse and complex group.

In both sets of interviews, across time, mothers – particularly white mothers whose children's fathers were from black African or African

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