King's College LONDON

CENTRE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

# A CONSTANT BATTLE:
## EXPLORING THE INTERGENERATIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF RACISM IN THE UK

## Summary

◎ Evidence shows that racism can have a profound and negative impact on a person's mental health and wellbeing.

◎ This policy briefing summarises evidence from a new study on the intergenerational consequences of racism in the UK. It examined the impact of both parents' and children's experiences of racism, and how these experiences influence parent-child interactions, mental health, and wellbeing.

◎ Parents and teenagers involved in the project highlighted the scale and pervasive nature of racism, including a range of negative and long-term outcomes.

◎ Participants told us about the effects of racism at multiple levels, including institutional, interpersonal, and internalised forms of racism.

"You've got to fight every battle, be it in a shop or in employment or at school or getting a place and doing something... it's a constant battle that knocks you" (Parent)

"My dad wasn't able to be promoted at work because he wasn't born here, he was really angry but he was very resigned, he didn't think he could do anything about it" (Teenager)

◎ Parent and child experiences of racism are related and occur at the same time, impacting mental health and wellbeing in both generations. These experiences influence parenting behaviour and parent-child relationships. Parents have sought to help their children navigate this by sharing experiences, suggesting coping strategies, and navigating conversations about racism.

**"The question the children pose to me is often "why is it like this?", "why is it not equal"? It's all to do with equality. And that's something I'm not very good at explaining" (Parent)**

◎ Parents and teenagers also raised the importance of intersecting identities and how other forms of discrimination, on the basis of gender and disability, for example, compounded their experiences of racism.

◎ Participants in the study highlighted the importance of social cohesion, safe spaces, and education programmes as areas for priority action.

# INTRODUCTION

This briefing summarises the findings of qualitative research into the intergenerational consequences of racism on mental health led by Dr Yasmin Ahmadzadeh (preprint Simela *et al.*, 2023), and is based on a collaborative project between researchers at King's College London and Centre for Mental Health. The project aimed to explore how parents' experiences of racism can impact children's mental health and wellbeing in the UK.

Research shows that children of parents experiencing mental health difficulties (such as anxiety and depression) are at higher risk of experiencing the same problems (ONS, 2019). It is also well-established that experiences of racial discrimination can have negative effects on mental health (Khan, *et al.*, 2017). However, little is known about the link between parents' experiences of racism and child mental health in families. Given the UK's central role in driving contemporary racism (through its history of colonialism and slavery), and the evidence of current racial disparities in mental health risk, treatment, and outcomes in the UK, this is a significant research deficit (Devonport *et al.*, 2022)

In recent years, there has been growing research, policy and practical interest in understanding intergenerational racism, both internationally and here in the UK, and how to respond to it. Evidence and literature on racism and its impact is much more advanced in the US than in the UK. Overall, our new findings show similarities between the experiences of racialised communities here in the UK and in the US.

This study also sought to address the lack of representation of people from racialised communities in mental health research and was designed and delivered by researchers with their own lived experiences of racism.

In Spring 2022, the team engaged with 14 parents of children aged 4-18 and 14 teenagers aged 16-18 who identified as belonging to a racialised group. They were invited to participate in focus groups and were asked about their experiences of racism and its impact, including on their mental health and parent-child relations. This briefing is a short summary of the findings from the research project. It outlines implications for mental health research, policy, and practice.

# WHAT IS RACISM AND HOW CAN IT MANIFEST?

Racism is a system of disadvantaging people and communities by structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the social interpretation of physical looks, culture, and other symbolic differences. It works by excluding, marginalising and inferiorising those communities who are racialised* (Nazroo *et al.*, 2020). Racism consists of structural (social, political and economic) and ideological (ideas about 'race', power and hierarchy) components.

There are multiple levels on which racism exists, including systemic, institutional, interpersonal and internalised racism, each of which is described as below.

◎ **Systemic racism** refers to racism embedded across a society. It is a feature of the large-scale social, economic, and political systems in which all members of the society exist – acting to privilege some groups and disadvantage others

◎ **Institutional racism** refers to racism embedded within organisations and institutions such as government, education, health care, and legal systems

◎ **Interpersonal racism** refers to racial discrimination, bias, abuse and bigotry shown by individuals. This can be manifested in many ways, from covert to overt acts, from microaggressions to deadly hate crimes

◎ **Internalised racism** refers to members of an oppressed racialised group adopting racist behaviour, ideology, prejudices and beliefs of racial hierarchy. This leads to oppressed people adopting negative messages about their own identity and self-worth.

* The term 'racialised' is used to describe the ways in which ethnic, racial and cultural communities have been categorised by white-majority systems according to the colour of their skin or other cultural or religious features, and in doing so have 'othered' and marginalised them.

# WHAT DID THE STUDY FIND?

With the question "How do parents' experiences of racism indirectly impact offspring mental health?", the study examined the indirect, or vicarious, effects of racism in the context of parent-child relationships, to help advance our understanding of intergenerational trauma and its impact.

Using email and social media engagement across school, charity, and community networks, 14 parents and 14 teenagers were recruited to participate in four online focus groups (two with parents and two with teenagers). Participants were required to self-identify as belonging to a racialised group in the UK where they resided for at least a portion of the year. Parental responsibility for at least one child or young person between the ages of 4 and 18 was also a requirement for parents. At the time of data collection, teenagers participating in the study had to be between the ages of 14 and 18. The parents and teenagers involved in the study did not have to be related. The final sample comprised people identifying with Black African, Black Caribbean, South Asian, East Asian, Middle Eastern, and mixed racial and ethnic identities across the UK.

Both parents and teenagers discussed how they cope with being racialised and marginalised based on their physical characteristics (such as skin tone, hair texture and facial features).

Four key themes emerged from their insights, which are summarised below:

1. How families experience racism in the UK
2. How this racism impacts parenting and parent-child relationships
3. How this racism impacts family mental health
4. Wider factors which shape their experience of racism.

## 1. HOW FAMILIES EXPERIENCE RACISM IN THE UK

In discussions, parents and teenagers reported experiencing racism across multiple levels, including systemic, institutional, interpersonal, and internalised racism, among other forms of racial discrimination. Microaggressions and covert forms of racism, as well as racism connected to eugenics, colourism, and anti-Blackness, had an impact on both parents and teenagers.

Participants in the study made it clear that racism occurred in public settings, including the streets, shops, banks, hospitals, schools and workplaces, and on social media.

> **"We'd go to the store and my mum would probably be trying to buy something and one of the cashiers would come and explain something to her but won't actually talk to her respectfully and would just assume she doesn't understand English and start talking to her in a derogatory way." (Teenager)**

Parents discussed how racism was predictable and that they had come to accept it as a normal part of life, recognising the likely long-term and negative effects. However, the opinion of teenagers on this were a little more divided; some didn't want to accept these experiences, while others felt resigned to them.

> **"This is something you have to experience whether you like it or not. Even if I move your school, you are still going to experience this. So, it's all about you growing a thick skin" (Parent)**

In addition, both parents and teenagers described challenging or resisting their experiences of racism as a 'battle' that can take its toll.

"You've got to fight every battle, be it in a shop or in employment or at school or getting a place and doing something, it's a constant battle that knocks you" (Parent)

"I felt like I was battling to make people see my point of view" (Teenager)

Parents and one teenager highlighted the long-term consequences of racism, including how it affects behaviour (e.g. feeling the need to work harder to prove yourself), self-perception (e.g., believing you are lesser), and wellbeing (e.g. feeling worn down by constantly thinking about it). Both parents and teenagers discussed the ways in which racism "stunts" the development of those who experience it. They explained how it can fuel their mistrust of other groups (particularly white colleagues and teachers), and, for some, other people within their own communities who uphold racism. Some parents also described the existence of a "racial hierarchy" in which Black people are most inferior and experience racism "from all corners".

"And unfortunately, as a Black person, you're always at the bottom when it comes to racial hierarchy. So, I prepare my child, just expect it from all corners" (Parent)

Some parents and teenagers shared their experiences of being outnumbered in largely white schools or neighbourhoods, and that conversations with white people about racism often felt disingenuous or counterproductive; either because they felt individuals might still perpetuate racism behind their backs, or because those in positions of power, such as teachers, would side with white children or people.

Despite these encounters, parents and teenagers both showed a strong desire for action to dismantle racism and its effects.

## 2. HOW RACISM IMPACTS PARENTING AND PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Participants discussed the efforts made by parents to shield their children from racism and to educate them about it. Parent participants spoke of telling their children to "watch out" and "be ready," and teenage participants spoke of their parents doing the same. Parents and teenagers told us how children from racialised backgrounds are taught to be cautious of who they trust to prevent unfair treatment. Teenagers also remembered their parents limiting specific activities (such sleepovers or outings with friends at certain times) to reduce their exposure to racism.

Many parents also shared other approaches they used to help protect their children from racism, such as ensuring their children performed better than average in school, or implementing affirming strategies to prepare children emotionally for racism.

"So I said to her, I understand you don't feel comfortable. But this is who you are. And as you get older, you're going to have to love yourself, because there's so much indifference in the world, you can't find indifference within yourself." (Parent)

"We are Black, but that shouldn't limit you. You shouldn't draw back on your expression. If you feel you need to express yourself, express yourself, don't let them shut you up." (Parent)

Some of the parents involved in the study also talked about the struggles they face navigating difficult conversations about racism, particularly striking the balance between shielding young children from racism and preparing them for what they saw as the inevitable. Many parents talked about the difficulties in discussing racism in relation to their child's experience in school.

"The question the children pose to me is often, "why is it like this?" "Why is it not equal?" It's all to do with equality. And that's something I'm not very good at explaining" (Parent)

For some of the parents and teenagers, discussing and sharing personal experiences of racism helped to strengthen parent-child relationships, whereas for others it contributed to a disconnection. One teenager, for example, discussed how their parent inadvertently contributed to their insecurities about their race by commenting on their skin tone.

## 3. HOW RACISM IMPACTS FAMILY MENTAL HEALTH

Both parents and teenagers discussed their feelings of fear and worry in relation to racism and how this impacted their own and their family's mental health.

Many parents described feelings of anxiety, hypervigilance and fear; sadness, helplessness and isolation; anger and frustration – which they said all impacted their wellbeing. A 'heavy' sadness was reported by parents, mainly in connection with their child's experience with racism at school. Parents also feared for the physical and emotional safety of themselves and their children.

> **"Always in that high-stress sensitive state, because you're always being triggered by every little thing that you think is going on out there" (Parent)**

> **"We were really, really scared [seeing posts on] social media, saying that "because the Black players made England lose, that they were going to be attacked the next day" it was so, so scary, that time for us" (Parent)**

Conversely, some parents also described their strength and confidence in their identity, and the ways in which this helped them to deal with racism.

> **"At that time I was scared and I was very meek, until one day things changed. And I just became very strong. I just refuse to put up with it." (Parent)**

While many parents in the study expressed confidence and emotional growth in overcoming racism and persevering, some teenage participants described their parents as insecure and lacking in self-confidence.

The emotions described by teenage participants largely mirrored those described in parents: anxiety, hypervigilance, and fear; sadness, helplessness, and isolation; anger and frustration. Teenagers felt that they had learnt from their parents to be hypervigilant and cautious. Children also felt confused about racism, and isolated by it. Parents recognised low self-confidence in their children, which was echoed by some teenage participants.

> **"It definitely made me more anxious to even do basic activities on the daily, because I would be afraid to go outside since I didn't want to get hate-crimed. I have become more quieter and reserved since I lost a lot of confidence in myself" (Teenager)**

> **"My children were worried about standing out more than they already did rather than celebrating any difference" (Parent)**

Teenagers also recognised feelings of fear, helplessness, and anger in their parents.

> **"My dad wasn't able to be promoted at work because he wasn't born here...he was really angry but he was very resigned, he didn't think he could do anything about it" (Teenager)**

## 4. WIDER FACTORS WHICH SHAPE THEIR EXPERIENCE OF RACISM

The final theme emerging from the study points to wider factors raised by participants which influence and shape their experiences of intergenerational racism.

Some participants also raised issues relating to intersectionality, where experiences of racism had been compounded by other forms of discrimination based on identities such as gender, immigration status and disability. For example, some discussed the impact of immigration and how immigrant parents often found it difficult to reconcile positive perceptions of Britain with the racism experienced by their child, whereas parents who were born and raised in the UK expressed a better understanding of racism in Britain and how to navigate it.

## WHAT IS INTERSECTIONALITY?

Intersectionality is an approach developed by American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw when she took the case of someone who was being discriminated against because of both her race and gender. At the time, people looked at gender discrimination and race discrimination separately – Crenshaw said we need to look at how these characteristics can combine and make life harder for people facing intersecting oppressions (Crenshaw, 2013).

Social cohesion was another key factor frequently highlighted by participants. While some felt there was a lack of cohesion between communities, others shared examples of unity and collaboration such as the recent wave of the Black Lives Matter movement and Asian Awareness Week. Both parents and teenagers emphasised the necessity for better education about racism in society to foster community cohesion.

Finally, both parent and teenage participants spoke about changing attitudes and behaviours, particularly around the hope for young people to lead progressive change and to break cycles of generational trauma. The disproportionate impacts on younger generations of both social media and the Covid-19 pandemic were also emphasised.

# IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE

The study identifies clear links between racism and its impact, including on parenting and parent-child relations. It also highlights broader issues relating to intersecting identities and the environment which require a deeper understanding and attention. Findings from the study support the hypothesis that parents' experiences of racism can impact their children's wellbeing in the UK, while further pointing to the impact of children's experiences of racism on their parents' wellbeing.

Addressing racism and the impact of intergenerational racial trauma requires action across different levels of society and from multiple institutions, decision-makers, and practitioners.

## RESEARCH:

Researchers and participants involved in the study identified several themes and areas warranting further research investigation, including:

◎ Future research must account for both parents' and children's direct experiences of racism. In particular, the cascading effects of children's school-based experiences of racism on parents' wellbeing warrants attention

◎ Many parents emphasised the need for greater research into positive, not just negative, outcomes and solutions in racialised communities. For example, future research could also investigate parents' coping strategies following racism, examining the links to their children's outcomes, to explore factors that support families to thrive despite racism exposure

◎ Research participants expressed desire for research involving those who perpetrate racism, which we did not originally consider as part of the study

◎ Finally, participants raised the importance of intersecting identities. Participant gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and 'foreigner stress' have been included as moderators in previous research on racism in families with mixed results, warranting more research within UK contexts.

## POLICY:

Policy action should also be taken to tackle racism and prevent the negative and long-term consequences of intergenerational racial trauma:

◎ The Government must commit to tackling all forms of racism, discrimination, and exclusion through a comprehensive and cross-government strategy. This should include action to address the specific injustices faced by racialised communities within key settings such as the health, education, employment, and criminal justice systems

◎ The Department of Health and NHS England should work with racialised communities to design and deliver more racially equitable mental health advice, information, and support by fully implementing and resourcing the Patient and Carer Race Equality Framework (PCREF)

◎ NHS England and professional membership bodies should work together to ensure the mental health workforce reflects the communities they serve, and that values of anti-racism, diversity and inclusion are actively promoted. Cultural competency and anti-racism training should form part of mandatory training for all practitioners

- Racial trauma, both direct and vicarious exposure, should be recognised as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) and the Department for Education should work alongside other key departments to develop a coordinated strategy and action plan to tackle ACEs

- The Department of Education should work with racialised communities to develop and embed an anti-racist and diverse curriculum that incorporates the histories and contributions of all racialised communities in the UK

- The Department should also include anti-racism and microaggression training as part of mandatory teacher training and education workforce training as recommended by **Not So Micro** and others.

## PRACTICE:

- Local providers of family services (such as family hubs) and mental health support should work together with their communities to fund and co-design more racially and culturally responsive services. These should include safe spaces where families can seek refuge from racism and access support

- Given the close links between parental and child mental health, whole family approaches should be adopted by practitioners, where appropriate, to build on the assets and protective factors that exist within family or household structures

- To promote better social cohesion, local services and practitioners should work together with their communities to mark awareness days, cultural events, and activities to promote and celebrate the UK's rich and diverse racialised communities.

- All local services supporting families and young people should consider the unique experiences and engagement preferences of racialised communities as part of the development and implementation of the Patient and Carer Race Equality Framework (PCREF) and the NHS Advancing Mental Health Equalities Strategy

- All schools, colleges and universities should ensure they take a whole-setting approach to anti-racism, equality and diversity, and comply with the latest guidance and legislation in this area. This should include ensuring all staff working with pupils receive training in these areas.

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# CENTRE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

## BRIEFING 62: A CONSTANT BATTLE: EXPLORING THE INTERGENERATIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF RACISM IN THE UK