Summary of Findings

To date, little research has focused on the everyday lives of lone mothers of mixed racial and ethnic children, particularly the ways in which they raise their children to have a sense of identity and belonging and what challenges or support they encounter in doing so. To gain insights into their experiences, this case study conducted in-depth interviews with 10 lone mothers living in Bristol.

Key points

- Mothers were frustrated by the assumptions made about their parenting abilities as they themselves had high levels of ‘cultural and racial literacy’ and worked hard to provide a sense of racial and cultural awareness and belonging for their children.
- Mothers tended to have contact with their own families, as well as the non-resident father, his family or community, and sought hard to maintain these relationships for the children’s benefit, particularly children’s cultural and familial knowledge.
- The vast majority of the mothers saw their children as clearly having a ‘mixed’ racial or ethnic identity, but also saw these identities as fluid and part of wider social identities.
- Mothers overwhelmingly preferred to use the term ‘mixed race’ to describe their children and tended to dismiss terms including the suffixes ‘heritage’ and ‘parentage’ as being too ‘official’ or ‘politically correct’.
- Most mothers generally considered living in neighbourhoods in which their families’ mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds were considered ‘ordinary’ to outweigh concerns regarding other neighbourhood effects, such as levels of crime and deprivation, though they noted that particular racial and ethnic issues were not absent from their communities.
- The majority of mothers had strong social networks that helped support their parenting and some also accessed more formal sources of parenting-related support, though not necessarily to do with ‘mixedness’. Overall, however, many felt that more available and sustained formal resources would be useful to support the differing needs of lone mothers with mixed racial and ethnic children.

The insights generated by the case study have a number of implications for policy, practice and research in relation to lone mothers of mixed racial and ethnic children, namely as regards the importance for those working in this area not to assume the experiences and needs of this group, but to recognise its diversity and complexity.
Background to project

This 2008-2009 study explored the experiences of 10 lone mothers of children from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds who lived, worked, socialised or educated their children in or around a multicultural ward in inner-city Bristol. The study was funded by London South Bank University's Research Opportunity Fund and conducted in collaboration with the Bristol-based charity Single Parent Action Network UK (SPAN), who were interested in learning more about a family group to whom many of their users and members belong.

Six of the mothers who took part in the study were from white British backgrounds, with the remainder from Black British, Mixed Racial/Ethnic, and Latin American backgrounds. The children's fathers came from Black African, African American, Black British, White British, White British/European, Eastern European, and British Asian backgrounds. Mothers had between one to four children whose ages at the time of interview ranged from 4-17.

Challenging assumptions and stereotypes

The particular forms that the stereotypes and assumptions surrounding lone mothers of mixed racial and ethnic children take regarding their ethnic profiles, relationship history, social isolation and parenting skills were certainly familiar to the mothers who participated in the study, particularly those from White British backgrounds.

Yeah. I think there’s a stereotype around white women with black children. And we are perceived to be a bit rough, a bit common, a bit like we don’t care who we sleep with, even if they are black! […] I think that people always expect your child to be behaving badly when you have a white parent with a black child because you’re a bit loose and feckless. (Chloe)

What emerged strongly from mothers’ everyday accounts of their lives, however, was how crude such portrayals of their lives were. Mothers came from a range of backgrounds, had differing situations and all worked hard to give their children a sense of racial and cultural identity and belonging, which they felt was important.

You can – even if you’ve got really limited resources, if your child’s from a different culture, you can go to the library. You know, you can, if your child’s father is black British and his parents actually came to this country in the 60s, then find out about it. Even if he says he wants nothing to do with that child, that child still needs to know. (Chloe)

Relationships and interactions with fathers and family

Far from being socially and culturally isolated, the mothers in this project were not only in contact with their own families but also sought, maintained and negotiated links with the non-resident father, his family or community. The role that fathers and their families could play in transmitting cultural knowledge or connecting the children to their heritage was important to many of the mothers – particularly white mothers – even though they felt themselves to be culturally literate:

I think it’s important enough for a child to have a father or a mother both in their life or know who they are, especially when they’re dual heritage. And I think that for me, I thought if I can possibly, possibly do anything to keep that role in her life in whatever way I will do it. (Zoe)

He likes going to his granny’s as well and having their food and things like that, so….yeah. [His grandmother], she’s very proud [African background] so she’s got an awful lot of that which just
Support and input from fathers and family differed, however, from case to case, due to the ease of or interest in negotiating contact to issues around geographical distance. Mothers worked hard to maintain these relationships, even where they found them difficult or frustrating. Although they were generally appreciative of the social contributions their families, the children's father and his family often made, it was nevertheless very clear that the majority felt the efforts on the parts of fathers in particular could be improved, even for most of those who had regular, sustained contact:

*I put in like 90%-95% of my efforts 100% of the time, I'm only supposed to put in 50.* (Zoe)

*I would like more [practical support]. Absolutely I would like more.* (Melanie)

**Identity and terminology**

In this study, the vast majority of mothers saw their children as clearly having a 'mixed' racial or ethnic identity and, for the most part, they thought their children also tended to think of themselves as mixed race or as having a mixed identity. At the same time, however, mothers didn’t see their children’s ‘mixed’ identities as excluding other forms of identification; rather they felt that their children could hold many identities simultaneously, such as being 'mixed race' as well as being ‘black’, ‘Bristolian’ or simply their own individual personalities.

Engaging in conversations with their children around identity and belonging was common amongst mothers and, often with fathers too. These conversations were both initiated by parents, as well as in response to children’s enquiries. It seemed that in many families, difference in physical appearance was often the stimulus for these types of conversations:

*It’s that whole, it’s happened before, her dad’s been sitting there and [my daughter’s] in-between and I’m there and she’ll go, ‘look, put your arms together. You’re white, I’m brown and he’s black!’ You know, it’s like, so you’re black, I’m white… it’s that whole…and she’ll sit there looking at him and looking at me!* (Zoe)

The mothers who were interviewed for this project overwhelming used the term ‘mixed race’ to describe their children’s identities and reported that their children did too. Mothers and children generally preferred this term to all others, seeing it as both ordinary and commonplace. For many of the mothers, terms that emphasised ‘heritage’ or ‘parentage’ did not describe their own or their children’s lives or experiences, but rather were a form of meaningless and arbitrary ‘political correctness’ imposed on them by professionals:

*Why should it be the white middle class person who decides the title? It just starts getting a bit, I think with the heritage thing, it just starts getting all into the political correctness…But I don’t know who decides, who is it that decides?! […] It’s a very…it just smacks of that whole superiority. We know what’s best for you. Well, actually, you need to go round and ask people what they want to be called. Or what do they use in their homes.* (Debbie)

**Neighbourhood and community**

For the vast majority of mothers, one of the greatest benefits of the neighbourhoods in which they and their children lived, worked and were educated was the racial and ethnic diversity, particularly the noticeable presence of other families like theirs. None of the mothers felt that
being the lone parent of children from a mixed racial or ethnic background made them stand out as different; rather, many mothers felt that their families' mixedness was seen as quite ordinary in their neighbourhood:

*In this area, the issue of kind of mixed relationships and therefore mixed children is kind of very much the norm, it's very much the norm (Christine)*

This sense of ordinariness meant that many of the mothers felt that the diversity in the area outweighed the negative elements present in the neighbourhoods in which they lived, such as the levels of crime and deprivation. Several of the mothers spoke about the active choices that they had made around living or educating their children in these diverse communities in order to provide them with important cultural resources and a sense of belonging.

*I personally think it’s better for them to be brought up in the inner city than being brought up in some, like where my parents live, which is…you know, very kind of, what’s the word…? Not very diverse. (Debbie)*

Although mothers generally felt positively about their neighbourhoods, this did not mean, however, that they felt there were no racial or ethnic issues in their communities. Whilst many of the mothers welcomed the strong sense of community found in their neighbourhoods, they also noted that it could lead to assumptions and an intrusive over-familiarity, particularly in relation to relationships between black men and white women, as well as the parenting of white women with children from mixed black and white racial backgrounds:

*I mean I get loads of stick about, from white men, like, ‘oh, you only go out with black men, you just like black men, don’t you?’ I don’t know, it is an issue, it’s a huge issue, but I think a lot of white men are…what’s the word for it? Are threatened by black men. But then in another respect, I’ve walked down the street when my brother lived [here] years ago, I’ve walked down the street with him and I would get, ‘why you with a fucking white man?!’ And I’m white! It’s my brother! So…I can’t… it’s a weird, weird [thing]. (Zoe)*

*Well I remember once we were in a shop and [my son] spat his dummy out and I picked it up and put it back in his mouth and some black woman said about white women being dirty and poor little thing…like he was being brought up by them, like he belonged to them because he was black. It was almost like that they felt, I, my feeling was they feel they have the right to comment because my child is black. (Chloe)*

Despite these frustrations, overall the majority of mothers were satisfied with the way they and their children were treated in their neighbourhoods and reported barely any reference to experiencing overt or direct forms of racism and prejudice.

**Concerns and Support**

As mothers generally felt that they were doing a good job of giving their children a sense of identity and belonging, the concerns that they had about their children did not predominantly centre on race and ethnicity but rather on a more general range of familial and social issues, such as family health, finances, children's education, fears of crime and lone parenthood generally:

*So I’m in that stage where I’m saying, well, I’m not really properly working and obviously because I’m still in the benefits system, I can’t earn more than £20 a week so I’ve got to decide*
whether I can [undertake work] on a part-time basis and change the benefits to family credit [...] it's really, really hard kind of decision to make because I could lose out very heavily. (Clare)

I have to say, if we have any issues, they are around [my child's] disabilities, not around his colour. (Chloe)

I mean for me actually, personally I think the bigger issue for probably me and them is the fact that they're being brought up in a single home. Because I think the actual, not having that father figure is a bigger issue than the kind of colour of their skin. (Debbie)

In relation to parenting, mothers often looked for support from their own families, as well as from the children's father and his family, though they frequently wished that more was forthcoming from these quarters, particularly from the children's father. Most mothers had also developed strong networks with friends and neighbours, which provided a ready and valuable form of support.

Whilst some mothers had also drawn on a number of formal support structures, such as educational courses, supplementary classes for children and free or low-cost childcare, few mothers mentioned using more specific parenting resources. Many felt that either they did not need these forms of support or that these forms of support were not for them; apart from the parenting programmes and resources offered by SPAN, which mothers said were very multicultural, there was a general feeling that most of the formal support networks and resources around parenting were not relevant to their lives, both as lone mothers as well as parents of mixed racial and ethnic children.

Parenting groups are terrible places to go for mixed race kids. They're terrible places. [They're full of] the white middle class from [names of neighbourhoods]. And they all know each other and I went there as a parent and it was really sad because I was sitting in circles and they know each other and they lunch at each other's places and they're very close and they don't let anybody else come into this. (Estelle)

When asked about what types of support and resources they would like to see more of, mothers said that they felt there was a need for more targeted and nuanced information about the experiences of mixed racial and ethnic people, children, couples and families, and the delivery of this should take different forms so that it suited mothers’ preferred needs and means of learning and interaction. The provision of safe and friendly spaces or forums for discussion and knowledge exchange about parenting children from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds was identified as important by a number of mothers. Moreover, mothers noted that any such resources should not just be widely and easily available, but also effective and sustained.

Implications
The case study findings point to a number of implications for policy and practice. These include:

Professional sensitivity: more nuanced policy and practitioner understandings of the different ways in which ‘mixedness’ is perceived, understood, challenged and supported by parents, children and wider society is needed in order to ensure the most appropriate and beneficial delivery of services to lone mothers and their mixed racial and ethnic children.

Terminology usage: greater recognition of the terminology that families choose to identify themselves with, and engagement with the reasons they do so, is needed. In particular, an avoidance of insistence on ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways to refer to mixedness would be beneficial.
Resources: wider provision of targeted, sustained and effective resources for lone mothers of mixed racial and ethnic children would be both welcomed by and beneficial to this family group. However, the diversity within families means that provision needs to be made for different forms of support (e.g. books, workshops, etc.) and different types of content within that support (e.g. hair care, dealing with racism within and outside the family, teenage issues etc.).

There are also a number of implications for future research in the field:

Categorisation of ‘mixedness’: Census and other statistical data group categorisations such as ‘Mixed’, whilst useful, can only provide limited ability to tell us who mixed racial and ethnic populations are and what they experience. It is therefore beneficial for those drawing on such data to acknowledge their indicative, rather than definitive, nature.

Comparison of different perspectives: Research on mixed racial and ethnic families often excludes the important processes of negotiation that take place between family members, including in lone mother headed families. More work on ‘family cases’, which seeks to bring together the perspectives of different family members, such as mothers, fathers, children, grandparents and new partners, would be useful in further understandings of the experiences and needs of these families.

Localised understandings: Although drawing on US-focused research on ‘mixedness’ can provide insights into those general issues that British families from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds might face, more research which seeks to understand national and localised pictures of ‘mixedness’ is critical, particularly as regards the informing and shaping of policy and practice.

For more information

The full report ‘Lone Mothers Of Children From Mixed Racial And Ethnic Backgrounds: A Case Study’ can be downloaded free of charge from SPAN’s website: www.spanuk.org.uk

SPAN is a uniquely diverse organisation empowering one parent families throughout the UK. We value the vital contributions of one parent families in society.  

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