Attachment of Black Mixed Parentage Children in a Racialised Society

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This is a discussion paper to stimulate thinking on a controversial subject, the quality of attachment of black mixed parentage children in a racialised society. In the 1980's this question was raised to challenge the unthinking placement of black children in white families. In this paper the question will be raised of attachment issues of black mixed parentage children in their birth families, the family where the vast majority of children will be raised. There will, of course, be implications for attachment in substitute families.

Black children with one white parent are once again a growing population with the mixed `racial' population being estimated in the 2001 Census at15% of the black population and 1.2% of the total population of the United Kingdom and with 55% of this population under 16 compared to 19% under 16 in the white population. They are a very diverse population in terms of family of origin though many will have a white mother and African Caribbean father (Barn, 1999). The healthy attachment of this group of children matters, not because they are problems, but because they, like all children, deserve the best and their attachment in birth families has not previously been considered in the literature on parenting. The optimum conditions for the healthy attachment of this group of children may be a model for many others living in a society where differences should be being viewed as the norm. This paper, however, can only tentatively suggest what might be optimum conditions because each individual and parenting situation is unique.

This paper emphasizes not only the racist nature of this society (as in MacPherson, 1999) but that this is based on racialisation. The levels of racism are well-chronicled:

Number of racist attacks recorded at 215,000 in 2000-1 and estimated to be double this figure and murders with a suspected or known racist motive, 25 since 1991.

Ethnic Penalty in employment whereby black people earn £7,000 less than similarly qualified white people in similar jobs (Guardian, 18.1.05).

This racism is mediated through the family and has a direct impact on children:
'Webster notes `what was striking among the young people we spoke to was the pervasiveness and normality of racism and the possibility of violent racism as a routine aspect of everyday life' (1995, p.17) and NCH Action for Children (1997) found that children gave a higher priority to the reduction of racist incidents than adults.

The racialisation thesis means that while different `races' do not exist as we are all one human race, we have been racialised, we have been treated; treat ourselves and each other as if different `races' do exist. These two dimensions; racism and racialisation are important in exploring the world of black children with one white parent.

Black children with one white parent are highly likely to experience racism (72% in Tizard and Phoenix 1993 survey). Additionally they are racialised as black: `the white/non-white line is a heavily guarded social barrier, and having one white parent is not deemed a

sufficient entitlement to cross it' (Wilson, 1987). The census, where the mixed category is black children (political sense) with one white parent and where this category is routinely included in the (black) minority ethnic figures confirms where black children with a white parent are officially located. Nevertheless, at some level, there has been a shift in the discourse where the identity of black is being questioned and most particularly so for black children with a white parent with disorientating consequences at best:

All these people are trying to define who you are tell you that you can't be Black. Look how light you are! Your mother's White so how can you be Black? (Ifekwunige, 1999).

The racialisation of the parents is equally important when we are looking at attachment. The child has two parents who have been racialised not just as opposites but as hierarchically positioned. This replicates our gendered society but while few people can sensibly challenge the existence of children of mixed gendered parents the existence of children of mixed `racialised' parents is still a subject for discussion, for polls etc. as is their racialised identity. People used to ask me. That made me realize that it isn't normal, or they think it isn't normal for someone to have a black dad and a white mum. That made me different. I never used to like it (Tizard and Phoenix, 1993, p.91).

What does it mean to have parents defined as hierarchically positioned?
What does it mean to be defined with the parent deemed `inferior/different/not normal/exotic/cool'?
What does it mean to be able to choose to distance oneself and be defined with the `normal'/mainstream parent?
What does it mean to not choose, to balance both?
What does it mean to `pass'?
How is attachment affected?

The literature on attachment (Bowlby, 1969) suggests that black children with a white parent can become attached to either/both parents in a non-`racial' way. But if we look at Ainsworth et al (1978) on attachment we see that the nature of the attachment (secure, avoidant, resistant, disorganized) can depend on what the child is offered. This has implications for the black child with a white parent. The literature is full of excellent parenting by white parents as well as black parents (Wilson; 1987; Fatimhelin, 1999) as well as subtly racist parenting by both:

Angela [the mixed race daughter of a white English woman] recounts how she and black male visitors were obliged to enter the house through the back door, because her mother wanted to avoid being stigmatized as a prostitute (Mama, 1995 p.101)

Mona speaking of her mother in Mama, 1995, p. 102-3 `She's very hard on black people. Her own people…I really think she really disliked the fact that I was born as dark as I was…'

Banks' work (1992) suggests that racist parenting is more likely with a white parent.
How does racist parenting impact on attachment? What is internalized in terms of self-esteem, trust and capacity to attach? What are the mechanisms (splitting, mental health issues) which enables a child to respond to the love shown them that does not accept them as they are? And what is the developmental process? There has been very little work done on this but I would propose that while the foundation for a secure attachment may be offered to a baby and that this is a very important stage, this can become shaken as the child grows up to

be perceived as `the other'. This can be increasingly clearly recognized by the child as the child's cognitive abilities and social awareness increases with painful results.

Black children with a white parent `come out' early to their families with all the dynamics of difference and sometimes partial acceptance:

I am very clear that my mother's racism and attempts to deny my father's and her children's culture, colour and identity had a profound effect (EYTARN, 1995, p.59).

But even in the `happy families' there may be challenges in internalizing a parent who is `racially othered'. In a racialised society the internalization of the racialised other may have the following personal and political consequences:

If a strong attachment is with the more powerful person in a racialised and racist world it may cause a denial of the less powerful parentage and that aspect of self (Tizard and Phoenix research indicated that 51% of children of `racially' mixed backgrounds had wished, when young, to be another colour, 70% white). If, in a racist society, a strong attachment is with the less powerful parent it may lead to a devaluing of self and a similar rejection of that aspect of self, if there is no buffer to racist thinking, the value of which is emphasized by Jackson (1997). Alternatively it may lead to a rejection of white parentage (Of the 51% who had wished to be another colour in Tizard and Phoenix's survey 10% had wanted to be black).

A strong attachment to both parents may appear ideal, leading a child to be `balanced'. Is this balance desirable in a racialised and racist society where a child may be officially defined as within the black group, experience racism to a similar level as children with two black parents (Tizard and Phoenix, 1993) and may benefit from the solidarity of a black constituency? Some welcome the balance (I would like to be called mixed race. That way I feel part of all races (EYTARN, p.63)) while others reject it as fitting into racist structures:

Politically identifying as mixed race and nothing more…can reveal a desire to be or function as a balance between all the races I am, giving equal importance to each…it is not possible. It is not wise Green in Camper, 1994, p.299).

Would a secure attachment to a white parent (whether combined with a secure attachment to a black parent or otherwise) impede a child's ability to function in a racialised society?
Can the child as they develop internalize the racialised other, love it deeply in themselves and the other and retain the wariness needed for survival and self protection in a racialised world?
Can they be rooted sufficiently in a black perspective to accept and be accepted as an integral part of the struggle? This appears possible for some but not others:

I will be Black till the day I die, no matter how many White people want to tell me who I am and what I am (Akousia in Ifekwunigwe,1999, p.112).

I wouldn't call myself black. I feel that is denying that my mother is white (Tizard and Phoenix, p.47)

Does a strong attachment to a white parent challenge a black identity? Mama (1995) is excellent at exploring the complexity of identity development and suggests it is not a linear process rather `subjectivity is a process of movement through various discursive positions whose availability is determined by the experience, exposure and imagination of the

individual' (p.163). But a strong attachment to a white parent may influence experience, exposure and imagination.

Would it matter if it did impact negatively on a black identity? There are two main opposing positions on this, both understandable in context. The first is where the preferred position is a balance, with a fear of a `too strong' black identity. This is often favoured by white parents anxious to parent a child in their own racialised image, by the child identifying with the preferred parent and by the post-modernist who sees the limitations of identity boundaries and the value of moving beyond racialised identities as a way of tackling racialisation. The other position where a black identity is prioritized may be favoured by a black parent anxious to parent a child in their own racialised image, by parents, children and others conscious of racism, by those who advocate postmodern blackness such as hooks (1991) to retain political action with fluid identities and by those who see the following value in a black identity:

An ability to defend and protect a person from psychological insults that stem from having to live in a racist society
Providing a sense of belonging and social anchorage
Providing a point of departure for carrying out transactions with peoples, cultures and human situations beyond the world of blackness

Is there another position that can be helpful to black children with a white parent and can be grounded in a sound attachment to their different racialised parents, and which is neither a balance nor a denial of dual/multifaceted identities. This position has been termed `Black Mixed Parentage' by Wilson (1987); `Black and Mixed Parentage' by Fatilhelim (1999); and the `Appreciation Stage' by Poston (1990).

`Here while psychologically connected to one racial group, the `mixed-race' person is enabled to explore and develop knowledge about the other side of his or her dual heritage. It would seem that this stage acts as a safety net, or secure landing station from which to view the individual's total environment and connectedness to both parents as well as the more abstract notion of connectedness to racial groups' (Poston, 1990).

This position is not uncommon:

It is clear that mixed parentage adolescents are able to develop a positive racial identity (black and African-Caribbean) and simultaneously claim dual identification. This ability increases with age and is associated with high self-esteem (Fatimlehin, 1999)

Many children seemed to have found a happy secure identity as black mixed race. This was particularly true of children in multi-racial areas (Wilson, 1987.p.vi)

I identify as Black but I am not ashamed of my non-black ancestry. I should be allowed to be who I am and so should everyone else. Just let's do it with enough awareness to know where we are really located (Camper, 1994, p.xxiv)

This position may have more in common with the complex world of black children living in predominantly white and racialised societies than is widely recognized. Imani (1996 p.200) writes of the 'glaring bi-cultural psychology' of black people and ABSWAP (1983) of the need to:
- To enhance positive black identity

- To provide the child with the techniques of 'survival skills' necessary for living in a racist society
- To develop cultural and linguistic attributes necessary for functioning effectively in the community of the child's origins, and
- To equip the child with a balanced bi-cultural experience, thus enhancing the healthy integration of his/her personality.

The literature (Wilson 1987; Richards (1990; Fatilhelim, 1999) suggests that the following context may contribute to a comfortable position of black mixed parentage linked to attachment to both racialised parents:

- Home where the child recognized as black mixed parentage
- Home where black parent and black people are valued and the occasional exclusion of black people with a white parent understood and challenged
- Home where white parentage and white people are valued while racism named and challenged
- Home where there is meaning to being black (racial pride, spiritual coping, cultural survival, extended family caring) as well as the implicit meaning to being white in a white dominated society
- Home, school, neighbourhood with diverse black people including 'inter-racial' couples and black mixed parentage children
- Above where child enabled to find own way of being black and black mixed parentage

Additionally, research suggests that it is important if the black parent available to the child confidently recognizes themselves as black, conveys some of the positive experiences of being black and participation in black communities and role models to the child participation in white society; and that the white parent available to the child acknowledges their own racialised identity, its history and privileges, has given up some of the privileges of whiteness without blaming child and participates in black communities. Both parents with whom the child is forming attachment bonds need a political awareness of racism and to enable the child to be aware of racism but as a group challenge rather than individual burden.

Many of us cannot manage these optimum conditions; many children do not have both parents available. Yet children survive and many thrive:

I am Black British and would like to be called Black or Mixed Race, the terminology isn't a particular problem. Being mixed parentage has given me a strong sense of my own identity although developing it has been a struggle but with a strong sense of victory at the outcome.

We need to value the strength of our children while offering them the best parenting and environment possible. We need to recognize the emotional costs and strengths not only of children but of parents:

I suppose at the end of the day all is due to my mother. That she hasn't made the decision that her children are half-caste or that she wants her children to be white. My Mum was the only white person in the family. She took on board a lot of Caribbean culture (Akousa in Ifekwunige, 1999, p114-5)

The black mother has to be completely at home in her blackness to develop a positive self

identity in her child (Wilson, 1987, p 196).

These parents who are working to ensure that their bonding with their black mixed parentage child is based on the reality of that child's current and future world in a racialised society merit our respect and support.

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