

**An Intersectional Analysis of the Narratives of
Black Single Mother-Son Dyads**

Miranda Armstrong

Goldsmiths College, University of London Thesis submitted for
the degree of Ph.D. in Sociology

November 2022

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Miranda Armstrong

Acknowledgements

I am hugely grateful to the mothers and sons who shared their experiences with me for this study. This project would not have been possible without their good faith and generosity.

Thanks to the Economic and Social Research Council for their support of this work through a PhD studentship. I will also always remember the kindness of the individuals who supported my crowdfunding campaign which enabled me to get started on the PhD at Goldsmiths.

I want to recognise Mum and Dad, for their sacrifices and all their various forms of support throughout my journey as a student parent.

Special thanks to my supervisors Professor Yasmin Gunaratnam and Professor Les Back for their steadfast support over my long and winding PhD journey.

I have pleasant memories of working and learning within the Sociology PhD community at Goldsmiths. Shoutouts to Maria Cieszewska-Wong, Stephanie Guirand, Alice Corble and Ignacio Rivera-Volosky. Thanks also to Professor Kirsten Campbell and the Graduate School at Goldsmiths.

Thanks to my examiners Professor Tracey Reynolds and Professor Kalwant Bhopal for examining my PhD during the outbreak of a global pandemic and for their extremely helpful comments on the thesis.

It is through the kindness, support and/or professional skills of women that I made it to the end of this journey. These women include Joy Campbell, Kate McFarlane, Mandi Martin, Lloyd Wylde and Joan Fletcher.

Thanks to Gareth Millington for taking a chance on me and bringing me abroad for what has turned out to be a fantastic academic adventure, and to the lovely team on the Archiving the Inner City project at York.

Thanks to Chikaboo Designs for patiently working with me to create the graphic pamphlet based on this study, *Beyond the Myth: Single Black Mothers and their Sons*, and to the journal, *Feminist Review*, for publishing my first paper.

And of course, enormous thanks to my son, Jackson, who has graciously walked this journey with me, fuelling my sense of purpose. Jackson has been my beacon of hope.

Jackson, I love you so much, son. I can play the PS5 with you for a little while now.

Abstract

This thesis examines the identities, relationships, family lives and social experiences of black Caribbean-heritage single mother-son dyads in London, England. The prevalence of single-mother family structure among black populations has been discursively framed as disempowering and hopeless for women and children. The dyad and family structure has been problematised for its perceived social ramifications and casually linked to a vast array of social problems, but these associations are generally unsubstantiated. This empirical, qualitative study investigates if the dyad is as much of a problem as claimed. It examines the perspectives and narrated experiences of single mothers of adult sons and men raised by women through 31 qualitative interviews. Some participants were interviewed a second time, which provided insight into shifting circumstances and understandings. Key themes which emerged from the data include mothers' excessive responsibility for their children, sons' ambivalence about male role models and masculinity as well as difficult emotional and psychic dimensions of the family structure for both mother and sons.

Overall, the findings indicate that experiences of the single mother-son dyad and single-mother family structure are complicated. But the research data also shows there may be some general positive elements of this family structure: mothers' autonomy, self-discovery and empowerment, and sons' development of critical consciousness on gender and space to construct individual identities. More broadly, participants' narratives highlight the workings of family structure as a form of social division and single parentism as a form of oppression which respectively interconnects with other inequalities and social forces. These work through representations, social attitudes and unequal experiences of the city. In offering new empirical and theoretical insights the findings of the study contribute to existing sociological knowledge.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Discourses around black lone motherhood in Britain are important in shaping definitions of the issue and, coming to have their own reality, may set the agenda for policy formulation.... Surely, more empirical research... privileging the situations and voices of black lone mothers, is required? Song and Edwards (1997:243)

This thesis examines the identities, relationships, family lives and social experiences of single black mother-son dyads residing in London, England. Census information indicates black and mixed heritage households are approximately twice as likely than other ethnic groups to be single-parent households (ONS 2019a). Figures from the Office of National Statistics (ONS 2019b) indicate approximately 56% of children across Britain's black populations are being raised by a single parent, who are predominantly mothers. But what does this mean?

The prevalence of single-mother families among black people has been linked to stress (Burton and Kane 1994:31-32), internalised stigma (Brooks 2016:65-66), unemployment and underemployment (Phoenix 1996), and financial hardship (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 1985[2018]; Phoenix 1994b:146-148; Edin and Lein 1997; Kalil *et al.* 2000) for single-parent black mothers, and for young men raised by them, internalised anger (hooks 2004:48-50), gendered identity issues (Sewell 2009), unemployment (Ball, Milmo and Ferguson, 2012), homelessness (Scarman 1982:25), imprisonment (Mullen and Clinks, 2014), school exclusion (Kulz, 2015) and overrepresentation within mental institutions (Morgan *et al.* 2005). Generally, it is viewed as a disempowering and hopeless situation overall for mothers and children. This study investigates if the single-mother family structure and the dyad are as much of a problem as claimed. The fact is little is known about the lives and realities of dyads as they are surprisingly under-represented in British research.

Single-parent black mothers and their sons are often discussed or referred to in media, policy and academic discourse, but their narratives are rarely heard. This research gives room to dyads'

experiences and perspectives to develop a deep and robust understanding of their lives. As a subcategory of British families, of black families and of single-parent families, single black mothers and their children are a multiply-marginalised and under-represented group (with exception see Phoenix 1987, 1994b, 1996, 1997; Reynolds 1997, 2005). This thesis focuses specifically on mother-son dyads as they have been particularly problematised, due to gendered understandings of parenting and socialisation. It does so to build an understanding of dyads' relationships, family lives and experiences that is robust and constructive. The aims and rationale of this project are discussed more fully later in the chapter.

This thesis uses the everyday categorical term *single parent*, rather than the arguably more respectable *lone parent*, to engage with and challenge the images conjured by the former. It provisionally uses the category *family structure* to refer to the single-mother family as a category of social difference. It also uses the speculative term *single-parentism*, which refers to the oppression or differential experiences of mothers and children due to their family difference. It uncovers and names the exclusion and discrimination based on family structure. Research has found that 80% of single parents have experienced some form of discrimination (Talbot 2021). It is important to think about family structure as a form of social division, as well as single-parentism as oppression because social harms upon families due to their difference and their positioning have not been widely acknowledged. Any negative outcomes of mothers and children are rarely understood in the context of social inequalities and injustice. The prevalence of single-mother families among black urban populations has been viewed and handled as a social threat, but there is silence around the inequalities and oppression which impacts their lives.

The section which follows outlines the debate around single black mother families. I want to suggest that the nature of the debate is a telling example of how intersecting social categories of difference – in this case, blackness, single-parent family structure, motherhood and young masculinity – are perceived and used within discourse by those in power. In the literature, it is noted that difference is typically mischaracterised and subordinated. As critically observed by Brah (1996:14, 117) certain social categories of difference obtain meaning within “fields of signification”. Single-parent black mothers, their households, single mother-son dyads, and single mother-raised young black men are categories imbued with negative social meaning. The late writer, poet and activist Audre Lorde suggested (2007:144) that humans are socialised to view human differences in simplistic opposition to each other, “dominant/subordinate...superior/inferior”. Actors’ social positions “necessarily acquire meaning and power (or a lack thereof) in relation to other social positions” (Collins 2019:46).

This perspective on difference suggests the social construction of 'the problem' of single black mother households must be unpacked.

This study regards the single-parent family structure as a part of family diversity, as previously recognised by family researchers (see Reynolds 2005 and Golombok 2015). I understand the higher numbers of single-parent families among black populations within the context of their distinctive social and economic situations, their cultural backgrounds as well as their histories of migration. A variety of figures and perspectives have interpreted this family difference in a multitude of reductive ways.

1.1 Tracing pathologising narratives

E. Franklyn Frazier was arguably one of the first sociologists to represent the black single-mother family as a social problem (1971a[1959]; 1971b[1939]). For him, the single-mother family structure is best understood in the context of socio-historic conditions. Writing in the North American context, Franklin suggests (1971a[1959]:18, 6-7) that in the context of histories of slavery African Americans have been "practically stripped of their traditional culture", including African traditions and practices related to the family. He also claims (1971a[1959]:20) that black mothers' "insubordination", "self-reliance" and "self-sufficiency" was honed within the conditions of slavery. For Frazier (1971a[1959]; 1971b[1939]) the disorganisation experienced by generations during slavery, as well as the socio-economic inequality experienced since, are the most pertinent factors upon family structure; Frazier claims pre-slave life bears no influence. This position would later be refuted (see Gutman 1977).

During periods of post-World War II migration from Commonwealth countries to England as well as from the American South to its northern cities, researchers increasingly studied black populations, possibly seeking to make sense of incomers. *My Mother who Fathered Me* (Clarke 1957) is one such study which examined a small number of Jamaican communities. Its author English anthropologist Edith Clarke deems black Caribbean families to be "highly unstable". She describes high rates of "illegitimacy" as being due to "sexual promiscuity" and "parental irresponsibility". The study does not contextualise the phenomenon. Another English anthropologist, Sheila Patterson, studied the settlement of black Caribbean migrants in Brixton, South London in *Dark Stranger* (1965). Patterson questioned the ability of mothers to parent in the context of their long working

hours, and considers the impact of children's "fatherlessness", as well as families diminished social support due to migration:

It is too soon as yet to assess the adequacy and tenacity of the West Indian mother-child bond under migrant conditions, where it is no longer buttressed by the constant presence of other close kin, where the child spends more time at school and on the street with friends and where his mother has less time and energy to devote to him after the working day. It seems probable that it may be weakened with unfavourable consequences in the second generation, particularly in families where there is no father or father substitute.

(Patterson 1965:296)

While Clarke and Patterson may have had good intentions, they appear to have approached their subject with a problematising stance. In a later analysis of discourse on so-called 'young mothers', Phoenix critically observes:

By virtue of their social class and often their colour and gender... researchers and journalists are usually socially distant from the young women about whom they write. A problem-centred approach...is easily produced and reproduced by them... [they] therefore stress negative findings...

(Phoenix 1994:152)

In the same year as Patterson's work on a local black community in Britain, sociologist and American politician Daniel Patrick Moynihan published *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965). Moynihan claimed this family structure was ultimately responsible for the social position of African-Americans:

Obviously not every instance of social pathology afflicting the negro community can be traced to the weaknesses of family structure...[but] once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate or anti-social behaviour that did not establish but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation.

(Moynihan 1965:19)

The narrow and harmful ideas expressed in the report had influence over time and across geographic space and generated much criticism by anti-racist and feminist scholars (among them

Gutman 1977; Wallace 1979; Davis 2019[1981]; Spillers 1987; Cohen 1997; Ferguson 2004; Reynolds 2005). An extensively researched historical volume *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* (Gutman 1977) undermines the arguments of E. Franklin Frazier and Moynihan with strong evidence that enslaved populations were traditionally organised, in that two-parent households were common at all levels of enslaved society, as well as post-abolition.

Michele Wallace (1979:12) notes the gendered, raced and classed asymmetries of power in challenging Moynihan's report: "the black woman did not, could not, effectively fight back. No one had written a report for her". Wallace's important observation remains relevant, black women, including single-parent black women, have generally lacked influence and representation in public life. As Crenshaw rightly suggests (1989:15) this is due to race/gender norms precluding their access. There was the absence of a critical mass well-placed to counter analysis like Moynihan's. The black lesbian feminist socialist collective Combahee River Collective, writing in a different context, outline (1977:n.p.) the dilemma of subjugated women struggling for equality like themselves: "we do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have". Wallace (1979:12,9) also asserted that dominant interpretations of the black single-mother family structure were shaped by culturally-specific myths about the family and gendered roles within it, which were not universal. It could be argued that xenophobic anxieties intensify concerns about the family difference among black and brown populations. Scholars (Billingsley 1973:442; Murray 1973:106) suggest that unconventionality among black people tends to be interpreted as "black pathology".

Another way family difference has been mobilised is within interpretations of social troubles. A large-scale uprising occurred in London's Brixton in April 1981, sparked by Operation Swamp, a 10-day stop and search campaign by plainclothes police on predominantly black members of the public. The report on the unrest (Scarman 1982) considers the situation of black Caribbean families in Brixton and it notes (1982:25) a "matriarchal... structure" of family networks, a higher proportion of single-parent families and the lack of kin support available to black migrant families. While it acknowledges (1982:25) "the impact of British social conditions... to be severe", it also causally associates the family structure with the numbers of black children in care and with young black people who are homeless. The Scarman Report also mentions as problematic the absence of mothers from home due to work (1982:25). Lawrence critiques such positions:

[...] not only does the absence of a 'father-figure' suggest a lack of discipline in the home [...] the fact that many Afro-Caribbean mothers have to go out to work in order for their families to survive, easily gets translated into the argument that they are neglecting their children. The resultant 'maternal deprivation' then 'explains' the 'violence' of their children. (Lawrence 1982a:78)

The ground-breaking work by Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe (2018), *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, similarly speaks back to pathologising discourse on single black mother families:

Sociologists blamed our inadequate 'broken' homes and the fact that we went out to work... they overlooked our history and the fact that we had to work to support our children. They undermined the deep sense of responsibility which we felt towards our children, who were battling daily to retain a sense of identity and purpose within the system [...] theories about inadequate black parents [...] provided such an easy scapegoat....

(Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018:72-73)

In the same decade, *The Swann Report* (1985) attempted to understand the factors affecting the achievement of black and brown children in English schools. Reproducing deficit narratives, the report discussed inner-city residence, council estate residence, being in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) and working single mothers as causal factors of educational underachievement.

During the 1990s, increasing rates of single motherhood across the population caused a moral and political concern about 'the family'. Right-wing sociologist Charles Murray (1990) observed there was a growing 'underclass' in England and suggested that the rising numbers of single-mother-headed families were a root cause as, from his view, they reproduced social disadvantage and poverty. Murray demonstrates (1990:22) a gendered understanding of sons growing up with their single mothers: "young men without permanently present fathers are unable to visualise themselves working". Murray implies economically active women cannot be role models to their sons, reproducing an inaccurate binary of dyads. The Conservatives led a 'back to basics' campaign during the same decade (Phoenix 1996:177-178; Kirby 2009:244) calling for a return to traditional values, including within the family and, at this time, Conservative politician Peter Lilley, then Social Security Secretary, repeatedly questioned the rights of unmarried mothers to state support.

It is against this cultural moment that the Black British movie *Babymother* (Henriques 1998) is released. The film tells the story of working-class single mother Anita, documenting her attempts to balance parenting, family difficulties and the achievement of her dream to be a DJ. The film sparked the following reaction from the *Daily Mail*:

[Babymother's] aim seems to be to encourage immature black women to behave like aggressive, self-pitying trollops, bring up more and more illegitimate children very badly, with no visible means of finance except the taxpayer.

(Quoted in Duncan, Edwards and Song, 1999:247)

Song and Edwards suggest (1997) that at a moment of public concern about family change, black single motherhood provided a repository for society's fears. While single mothers in general were portrayed as deviant (Duncan, Edwards and Song 1999), there was an indication that family difference among black populations was viewed as a particular concern. A content analysis of press reports by the sociologist Tracey Reynolds found that the press focus on 'absent fathers' among Black British populations was disproportionate:

In no other culture is the issue of male absenteeism given such dominant coverage. This makes male absenteeism appear to be culturally specific to Black families of Caribbean descent, although [the phenomenon] can be identified across different societies and cultures.

(Reynolds 1997:104)

Reynolds (1997:105) suggests the volume and tone of these reports served to "obscure the influence and involvement Black men have always possessed within the family". The distorted perspectives to which Reynolds refers underscore the need for scholarship which records the many different realities of dyads' family lives.

The way young men experience this form of family difference has been thought about in limited ways, even by those known for working from a relatively progressive position. In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*, the late path-clearing feminist scholar and social critic bell hooks (2004:48-50) states that the sons of "absent fathers" experience a particular type of grief, a "crisis of...longing": "boys learn to cover up grief with anger; the more troubled the boy, the more intense the mask of indifference". From hooks' view, these young men are "far more likely to invest in a hypermasculine ideal", and "fear of not being able to attain the right degree of manliness is often

translated into rage". These comments homogenise and negatively essentialise young masculinity. Moreover, studies (Abbey 2001; Drexler 2005) raise questions about this position, as it has been found that single-parent mothers of sons can support the development of emotional intelligence and skills for productive communication. Conversely, research (Thomas 2001:130) also found that the efforts of feminist mothers to raise sons with a more critical sense of gendered identity were often undermined by wider society, namely through "peer group pressures," "mass media" and the "sexist expectations and values" of some fathers. The role and influence of the social construction of masculinity have been underexplored. In her ground-breaking writing, Lorde reflected upon how she was raising her son to resist such pressures:

The strongest lesson I can teach my son is...: how to be who he wishes to be for himself. And the best way I can do this is to be who I am and hope that he will learn from this not how to be me, which is not possible, but how to be himself. And this means how to move that voice from within himself, rather than to those raucous, persuasive or threatening voices from outside, pressuring him to be what the world wants him to be. (Lorde 2007:74)

Instead of consideration of the effects of sociocultural influences, a typical reaction of those in power has been to causally link social problems in which young men are involved with single-mother families. Responses to disturbances across urban England in the summer of 2011 are an example of this. During a traffic stop with the intention of arrest, Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old mixed heritage man from Tottenham, was shot twice by firearms police and killed. A few eyewitnesses reported that Mr Duggan had been surrendering (Mureithi 2021). A peaceful gathering outside Tottenham police station changed when a skirmish involving police officers and a female protester occurred (Gilroy 2013a:554). This ignited a rebellion in London which spread to other English cities and resulted in five deaths and 3,000 arrests. Commenting on the involvement of male youth in the unrest, David Lammy, the Labour MP representing Tottenham, claimed the prevalence of single-mother households meant young men were more susceptible to negative influences: "The angry young men in the riots had been lost to a nihilistic subculture long ago", he wrote (2011:120), "because they had no one to steer them through their journey to manhood". The Conservative Prime Minister at the time of the rebellion, David Cameron, expressed a similar view:

I don't doubt that many of the rioters out last week have no father at home. Perhaps they come from one of the neighbourhoods where it's standard for children to have a mum and not a dad...where it's normal for young men to grow up without a male role model, looking to the streets for their father figures, filled up with rage and anger.

(Cameron 2011:n.p)

David Lammy made similar remarks (Cecil and Bryant 2012 n.p.) in an attempt to explain knife crime: "usually the child who has committed the offence comes from a background where the father has been absent". Young men raised by single-parent mothers have been much discussed but do not often have the platform or privilege to speak back to discourses and to publicly interpret their own experiences. Oft-repeated caricatures perpetuate harmful stereotypes. This study aims to develop a fuller and fairer account of their lives which includes sons' perspectives.

In the late noughties and twenty-tens, old themes about family structure and the dyad continued. Educationalist Tony Sewell (2009, 2010, 2018, 2019) has repeatedly implied that single mothers are inadequate. In a discussion of street violence, he suggests there is a "grip of gangs" and a "lure of knives" that a single parent is ill-placed to handle (2019: n.p.). Sewell claims any sons of single mothers turning to gangs do so, because black boyhood is "over-feminised" (2009:17), and they are running away from the claustrophobia of their female surroundings" including "their mothers, grandmothers and female teachers" (2009:63).

The debate also continued in the United States. On the campaign trail for the American presidency, then-senator Barack Obama made the following comments, not dissimilar to Moynihan's, at an appearance at an African-American church:

We know that more than half of all black children live in single-parent households... children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime; nine times more likely to drop out of school and twenty times more likely to end up in prison. They are more likely to have behavioural problems, or run away from home, or become teenage parents themselves. And the foundations of our community are weaker because of it.

(Obama, Quoted by Jefferies 2013:139)

Obama does not contextualise the divergent outcomes of African American youth within the unjust and inequitable social conditions. He implies that it is black people who need to change not the system. Crenshaw notes (1991:1253-55) the belief of some perspectives that patriarchy in black family homes will transform the situations of black communities and argues that expectations of and support for patriarchal power within the home must be deconstructed.

The distorted ways in which single-parent black families are understood reveal a widespread lack of understanding of the challenges some families face. In 2019 14-year-old Jaden Moodie was violently murdered in East London as part of a drugs turf feud. The comments of *Times* columnist Rod Liddle on the incident were published under the title *Half of black children do not live with their father. And we wonder why they're dying* (The Sunday Times, 13 January 2019). For Liddle, Jaden Moodie was born "into utter hopelessness": "you look at that kid in the photographs," he wrote, "and think where was Mum? More to the point, where was Dad?" From perspectives like Liddle's, present single-parent mothers are woefully inadequate. For me, the fatalistic presumption of "utter hopelessness" can be understood as single-parentist essentialism. It is such reductive points of view that this study aims to counter. In the analysis of family structure and dyads, social context is important and in the matter of Jaden Moodie's story, it is indeed critical. Less discussed was the fact that Jaden's father was deported from England, separating him from his family, who as a result suffered hardship. That the household then struggled to survive after Jaden's mother lost income due to a serious injury, that Jaden was excluded from school, and that his family had become homeless (Taylor 2019; Long 2019; BBC News 2020).

Finally in this section, the analysis above has shown that denouncements of the single-mother family structure and dyad come from a variety of perspectives. At a panel discussion event in 2019, rapper and entrepreneur Jay-Z (Shropshire 2019:n.p.) claimed young people raised in single-mother households develop "an adverse feeling toward authority". For him this aggravates any interaction with police, leading to dangerous altercations. The comments of Jay-Z, Obama and Lammy are not only harmful but also surprising given that they are all single-mother-raised men. Although uniquely placed to offer constructive information based on first-hand experience, they make statements which reinforce stereotypes of family difference and the dyad. Also, in 2019 then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson refused to recant comments from his previous journalistic work in which he described the children of single mothers, not completely unlike Jay-Z, as "ill-raised, ignorant, aggressive and illegitimate" (Sharman 2019). Such narratives from a spectrum of voices

combine to misrepresent single black mother-son dyads with little recourse. It is these debates with which this project engages and into which the study aims to make a sociological intervention.

1.2 Project impetus and research approach

I undertook this research due to my own experience of raising a son as a single parent in London. I am aware of the impact of the narratives detailed above, as well as the lack of generative empirical knowledge on the subject.

My son, J, was born during the winter of 2005. When J was still tiny, I worked full-time and avoided taking up council housing, conscious of “scrounger” narratives (Phoenix 1996) – the English equivalent of American “welfare queen” discourse (Dow 2015). Later, J would attend a mentoring scheme for black boys led by black men dressed in suits. Influenced by male role model discourse (see Tarrant *et al.* 2015) I was convinced J needed things I could not provide.

When I decided I wanted to earn a degree, I hoped the academic literature I gained access to would be beneficial in providing useful insight into how single mothering was done well. However, what I found implied the futures of single mothers and their children were predetermined. My ongoing experience of the family structure and dyad, as well as becoming acquainted with other dyads, provided an inkling that there was a gap between discourses and the realities of mothers and children.

This does not mean there were no difficulties. While researching dyads in my master's course I was experiencing things that were commonly described by the research participants I interviewed, yet largely unacknowledged at societal level. This included: balancing the demands of caring and being a student parent (NUS 2009; Sela 2013; Lashley 2014), struggling to secure an affordable home as a one-income family in a gentrifying London (Watt 2016, 2013; Dawood 2017), navigating an unequal local secondary school ‘market’ (Reay and Lucey 2003; Butler and Hamnett 2010; Benson Bridge, and Wilson 2015), worrying where my son would be placed by school staff among a socially-diverse milieu of students, in the context of a history of racialised low academic expectations (Coard 2005a, 2005b[1971]; Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]; Blair 2001), as well as managing worries about my son experiencing street violence (Younge 2017; Greenfield 2018; Hymas 2019) and police harassment (StopWatch 2019; Dodd 2019). While it is true that experiences are not homogeneous, there is much evidence to suggest that the distinctive challenges faced by black

mothers and dyads are numerous and often distinctive (Golden 1995; Reynolds 2005; Lawrence 2006; Chapman and Bhopal 2013; Dow 2016a; Elliot and Reid 2016; Ward 2017; Elliot-Cooper 2019; McClain 2019). The purpose of this study is to build an understanding of dyads' lives, including the factors involved in *why* experiences vary.

The central questions of this thesis are: what can the accounts of single mothers and men raised by them tell us about the experience of black single-parent family life? How and in what ways do mothers and sons respond to their situations, their circumstances and the social conditions? What are the intersectional roles of race, gender, class, geography and family structure in the narrated accounts? In the social context, to what extent can mothers and children exert control over their lives? These questions were developed to be exploratory, allowing room for the unexpected to emerge.

To answer these questions, this empirical study analyses qualitative data generated by 31 qualitative biographical interviews. The interviews are based on the perspectives and experiences of 21 participants – 11 single mothers of adult sons and 10 men raised by women. 10 participants were interviewed twice across time for examination of changing circumstances and relationships. The methodological approach taken is critically discussed in Chapter 4.

The study uses the malleable framework of intersectionality to guide analysis and to reveal some of the complexity of dyads' experiences. To achieve this, the speculative terms family structure and single-parentism are generally used within models of intersectionality, as mentioned. Family structure in this case refers to the single-mother family, while single-parentism describes the differential experiences mothers and children face because of family difference. Intersectionality makes visible how different forms of oppression and inequality work interconnectedly to "marginalise" and "exclude" those in social categories of difference (Crenshaw 1991:1242). Dyads are positioned at neglected axes of the intersection. Family structure is one social division shaping the lives of women and children which has suffered a relative lack of interest, particularly when it intersects with race. The purpose here is to make this power relation and its disadvantageous connections to other social divisions visible. As previously stated, this study considers the impacts of inequalities and oppressions at intersection of race, family structure, gender, geography and class. As well as considering the difficulties dyads face, this research also considers if and how mothers' and sons' positioning generates forms of critical consciousness, agency and empowerment. The theoretical framework is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

1.3 Aims and rationale

So far, this chapter has outlined the discursive context and impetus behind my study, the discourses it engages with and its analytic approach. In the context of all this, it is worth making clear the aims and rationale of this project.

Media sensationalism and the general pathologisation of dyads have given the impression that family structure is a life-determinant. In other words, any divergent life trajectories of single mothers and their children are natural. This has obscured the range of experiences of mothers and sons. The research aims to discover the factors involved in relatively positive experiences of the dyad. While it recognises the role of intersectional inequality and oppression, it also holds the view argued by Avtah Brah (1996:91), that there are other things shaping lives, other than oppression. It examines the role dyadic relationships and family practices as well as consciousness, agency, empowerment and resistance play in shaping experiences. Treated as objects rather than subjects in discourse, little is known about the inner worlds, relationships, family lives and everyday realities of single mothers and sons. This overlooks one important dimension of dyads' lives, the black family home. bell hooks argues (1990) that the black family home can be a vital space of affirmation and nurturing for its members. The study aims to develop an analysis of dyads that encompasses this intimate dimension of their worlds.

Another key aim of this study is to place dyads in social context by identifying and untangling strands of oppression at work in their lives. This is to decipher if claims about family structure are obscuring the workings of multitudinous inequalities, including racial and urban inequalities. The study problematises the social inequalities dyads experience, rather than seeing them as inevitable due to their intersectional positioning at family structure, race and geography. The challenges faced by black mothers and children are rarely problematised, congruent with the silences and marginalisation of black women's issues in general (see Crenshaw 1991).

Black people's involvement in research takes a "naturalised absence/pathologised presence" pattern (Phoenix 1987:51). Representation of the single black mother-son dyad is the same. During the 1990s there was much media, policy and academic discussion about single motherhood in general, predominantly alarmist in tone. While the moral panic has quietened, there remains a need for a paradigm shift on the subject, particularly in thought on family structure/race. The single-black-mother family has been compared negatively against the white middle-class nuclear family,

with the latter erroneously assumed to be a universal standard (Chambers and Gracia 2022:32-34). Distorting paradigms on the phenomenon have developed through “misnaming” and “distortions” of difference Lorde calls (2007:115). This inaccuracy is counterproductive, in its misdirection of policy and practice, and attitudes and behaviours, as well as in its potential to disempower. For Collins (2019:43), there is the potentiality for a paradigm shift when “traditional frameworks no longer sufficiently explain social realities”. New intersectional knowledge of the dyad and family structure could contribute to what Collins calls (2019:38) “disciplinary reform”.

1.4 Chapter overview

This chapter has provided the context of the study, outlined its focus and the main theoretical and conceptual frameworks it uses. This final section of the chapter provides an overview of the thesis and outlines its structure and content.

As demonstrated above, the narratives of patriarchal and Eurocentric perspectives have shaped understandings of single mother-son dyads and single-mother family structure in black populations. Throughout this thesis, I argue and demonstrate the need for a counter-discourse or a ‘resistant knowledge tradition’ which contextualises, legitimates and reimagines this family form. *Chapter 2: Literature Review* synthesises and consolidates relevant theoretical and empirical scholarship to develop a critical understanding of the nature of the dyad. It draws on writings beyond the academic sphere to try to set out a background of constructive knowledge. The following chapter discusses the heuristic used in this study to contribute to this existing knowledge. In *Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework* I demonstrate how intersectionality as an analytic tool is ideal for illuminating the varied realities of subjects who are simultaneously positioned across categories of difference. The chapter provides an overview of the framework and highlights different forms of intersectionality relevant to this research, including representational intersectionality and political intersectionality. It argues the importance of a multi-categorical approach for certain forms of subjectivity and discusses the general intersectional model and categories used to analyse the narratives and narrated worlds of dyads – race/family structure/class/gender. In *Chapter 4: Research Methodology*, I expound upon the methodological approach taken and critically reflect on the practical process of the research. I reflexively discuss my positionality in relation to research participants, including the notion of being an insider/outsider.

The second part of the thesis focuses on the analysis of research data and highlights the key findings of the study. *Chapter 5: Perspectives and Realities of Dyads* analyses dyadic relationships, participants' family lives and the spaces from which they draw support, which unveils the contradiction between deficit narratives and dyads worlds, including homelives. The chapter also examines their perspectives on family structure. I suggest the fact that mothers and sons felt unable to positively identify with the family form demonstrates the need for a resistant knowledge project at intersections of race, family structure and gender. The phenomenon of single black motherhood is much discussed across political, academic and popular spheres, yet the narratives of single black mothers themselves are rarely included. The narratives of participant mothers are amplified in *Chapter 6: The Performances and Labours of Mothers*. It explores their perspectives on trying to balance providing and caring and the psychic demands of their multifaceted role. The research data examined here demonstrates the complexity of black single-parent women's experiences of family structure. They enjoy autonomy, self-efficacy and empowerment but are also subject to various forms of constraint, in the excessive responsibility for childrearing, in the practice of self-regulation in the context of stigma and in performances of hidden labour.

Being raised in a single-mother-headed household has been claimed to be a life determinant for young black men. Limited and sensationalist media stories have obscured a spectrum of life realities of sons of single black mothers. *Chapter 7: The Relationships and Subjectivities of Sons* examine sons' identities, inner worlds and perspectives on relationships with men. It explores sons' variety of experiences of non-resident fathers and their responses to these, as well as dominant claims about the importance of male role models for young men like them. Analytic attention to under-researched positioning at intersections of race, family structure and gender, finds sons exercising agency and critical consciousness in discerning between appropriate identity spaces and masculinities, and in being self-defining. One aim of this research is to scrutinise the roles of the social conditions and social forces in the lives of mothers and sons. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 explored the perspectives, relationships, identities and experiences of the dyad and family structure. *Chapter 8: The Social Context of Inner London* pans out to try to understand the social landscape dyads live against. It demonstrates how interconnected inequalities and oppressions generate the dyads' unequal experiences in the city. In negotiating this geography of urban inequality, much is demanded of mothers and sons, in that they must refuse marginalisation, devaluation and criminalisation. Analysis of participants' narratives illuminates the distinctive and unequal nature of experiences at intersections of race, family structure, class and geography, and shows the necessity of dyads of social consciousness, resistance and agency for a sense of control and hope

for the future. Chapter 9: *Conclusion* details the answers to the questions of the research project, outlines its contribution to sociological knowledge and makes suggestions for further research. I argue that longstanding claims of the single mother family structure among black people being pathological and a negative life-determinant are inaccurate and that the single mother-son dyad is not as problematic as claimed. My findings indicate that the problematisation of single black mother-son dyads, including the separation of sons from fathers, is misguided and counterproductive. The study shows that a negative focus on family difference has obscured mothers' and children's experiences of inequalities and oppressions, obstacles and difficulties which necessitate they deftly use forms of consciousness and agency to overcome.

Chapter 2. Literature review

The lack of knowledge and understanding of the intersections of blackness, single-mother family structure, and young masculinity can be understood as “the legacy of exclusions of multiply marginalised subjects from feminist and anti-racist work... and the impact of those absences on both theory and practice” (Nash 2008: 3). Accordingly, there is a need for the consolidation of perspectives and knowledge which provide a robust understanding of the dyad and family structure. To examine perspectives on dyads, the family and the social conditions, this literature review draws on sociological and psychological scholarship as well as non-academic literature. To develop a full and fair understanding of underrepresented groups it is worthwhile engaging with a broad variety of literature from a diverse range of sources (Lindsay-Dennis 2015 512-513). The stories and voices of black single-parent women and the men they have raised have been more likely to be found in memoirs and non-fiction (see Angelou 2008[1986]; Emecheta 1986; Taylor-Guthrie 1994; Golden 1995; Lammy 2011; Laymon 2016, 2018; Noah 2016; Akala 2018) and journalism (see Hattenstone 2014; Ewing 2016; Noor 2018; Lewis 2019; Younge 2020). This form of knowledge and insight is drawn upon here. Developing a fuller understanding of the single black mother-son dyad is critical, due to their historically distorted intersectional representation. As Phoenix (1996:181) critically observed, “discussions of lone motherhood often fit a normalised absence/pathologised presence couplet... where those single mothers and their children who are faring well are not discussed and those who are considered problematic make headlines”. This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section discusses sons’ development in dyads, where I show how emphasis on gender might be unnecessary and unhelpful. The second section considers critical perspectives on alternative understandings of family. The third section critically examines single mothers’ domestic experiences, and the final section places single mother-son dyads and their families in a social context.

2.1 Gender and the dyad

I begin by considering whether there is a need to de-emphasise presumed gender differences within the single-parent mother-son dyad. As the previous chapter demonstrated, it is a key

reason for its problematisation. It has been suggested that anxiety about gender differences in the mother-son dyad is best understood in light of dominant, Eurocentric gender socialization theories (Barrett and McIntosh (2015[1982]:26). Social learning theory suggests that children learn their gendered role from the same-sex parent, conditioned through rewards and punishment. Cognitive development theory posits that children actively learn each person belongs to one of two genders, while psychoanalytic theory claims that it is children's awareness of genital sex differences that result in the child identifying with the same gender parent (as discussed in Phoenix 1987:52-53, 1997). Phoenix (1987, 1997) suggests that Eurocentric theories of gender socialization are based upon assumptions that children live with a mother and father, even though children have long been raised within diverse family forms (see Golombok 2015; Reed 2018). For Phoenix the fact some black children grow up without fathers in their homes does not render their socialization within the household inferior:

Black children learn more positive gender role models from their own social networks. Black women's participation in the labour market means that black children grow up accepting that mothers can also be employed. The fact that black children are more likely to live with other relatives as well as their parent(s) means that they have a wider variety of people to interact with and with whom to develop close relationships.

(Phoenix 1997:64)

Here Phoenix suggests that the single-mother household may have strengths which benefit the children raised in them. Given how much black single mother-son dyads appear in discourse, how the gendered identity of sons develops within this family structure has been under-explored. It is also suggested that the role of mothers in the sons' development has not received enough attention. Previous work that sensitively explores the nature of the single mother-son dyad, offers critical and constructive insight. In a review of relevant literature, Bush (2005) concluded that there is little difference in how African American mothers and fathers approach preparing sons for adulthood. Bush suggests that the spaces of knowledge that mothers and fathers "cannot teach", due to their gendered positioning are narrow; for him, the approaches of heteronormative parents largely overlap (Bush 2005:385-387). Bush concludes that the body of work examined signals that "black mothers play a significant role in the healthy development of manhood and masculinity":

[This] challenges our notions about mothers and fathers, males and females, and masculinity and femininity by blurring traditional lines of separation. In other words, the body of literature both covertly and overtly suggests that we view mothering as an act rather than as a gender or biological assignment. (Bush 2005:388)

The parenting of sons by lesbian mothers and single-parent mothers is being examined increasingly with a critical approach (Wells 2001; Thomas 2001; Drexler 2005; Langa 2010). This is contributing to an emergent perspective which views the mothering of sons as a space of possibility and opportunity and as a chance to “raise non-sexist men, who reject traditional masculinity” (O’Reilly 2001:4). O’Reilly suggests (2001:5) that by parenting in a feminist way and supporting sons in subverting limiting forms of masculinity, women can raise “happier healthier boys”. A research study with adolescent sons of single-parent women in South Africa found they were typically sensitive, “non-risk-taking”, “non-violent”, and “non-sexist” (Langa 2010:524). Langa found that given their positive relationships with their mothers, sons were more comfortable discussing certain topics with their mothers (p.523). They also disidentified from their non-resident dads (p.524), and as emerged in another study, imagined fathering differently in their “imagined futures” (Wetherell and Edley 1999a). Wells (2001) articulates how, for her, lesbian households support boys’ psychological, personal and social development:

I think lesbians provide their sons with tremendous gifts. The first would be a broadened spectrum of emotional expression. We understand that the prohibition against men expressing any emotion other than anger has ramifications for world and domestic peace. We all know what the world tells girls they cannot do and boys what they cannot feel. Lesbian parents strive (like feminist parents everywhere) to encourage our sons to embrace all kinds of emotions. We encourage them to develop nonviolent methods of negotiation. We teach our sons self-sufficiency... not just to avoid the domestic servitude of another generation of women: self-sufficiency is, in itself, a tremendous gift. (Wells 2001:161)

It is worth developing knowledge of the nature of sons' development in Black British single-mother family households. Jess Wells (2001:160) discusses evidence from the family law section of the National Centre for Lesbian Rights which reveals that lesbians more often lose custody of boys due to the prevalence of male role model discourse (Tarrant *et al.* 2015). Relatedly, Odih

(2002:95) notes that women have been excluded from spaces of mentoring support for boys; it is generally accepted that only older males can provide effective role models for young men. Wells (2001:160) counters such arguments, insisting on the need to move beyond anxiety about resident role models for sons; appropriate and good role models of any gender can be found with ease in everyday life, an assertion supported by work conducted with sons in mother-only families (Drexler 2005:60-93).

There has been much concern about young men's ability to identify appropriate role models (Sewell 2009; Cameron 2011; Lammy 2011). However, it could be said that attraction to bad influences would depend on a young man's inclination. Hattenstone (2014:n.p.) shows some of the dilemmas facing young males growing up in single-mother households. In an interview with Ashley Walters, the rapper and actor narrated his complex development and shifting experiences of growing up without his father, and offered his thoughts on how the absence of his father affected his trajectory: "I enjoyed life growing up with women," he says, "my aunt, my gran, my mum were the main people in my life. So, I suppose I do embrace my feminine side". He recalls a strong curiosity and admiration for his father: "He went to jail, I think, 17 times. He was never there, to be honest, but I always had this huge passion to know him, to be around him. It was exciting to me" (Walters, quoted in Hattenstone 2014:n.p.). For Walters, this explained his trajectory:

That's part of the reason why I made some really crap decisions. Because I did look for a male role model outside my house, and those people became So Solid. I was looking for a father figure. So, I followed some people thinking, ah, that's what a man's meant to be. And it turned out it wasn't. (Walters, quoted in Hattenstone 2014:n.p.)

Walters feels he was able to eventually develop a more cautionary understanding of his father:

I realised he set me one of the best examples because I knew the effect he had on me and my life, I would never let that happen to my children. It was a shining example of what not to do as a dad. (Walters, quoted in Hattenstone 2014:n.p.)

I suggest that any choice of a role model may simply reflect a young man's personality and temperament. The perspective that the sons of single mothers gravitate toward deviant role models stems from theories of male essentialism which ascribes violent and anti-social traits to young men. Writer and professor Kiese Laymon (2016, 2018) has also reflected on his complex

experiences of being raised by women. Laymon has been open about traumatic parts of his childhood and youth, but according to Noor (2018:n.p.) he remains critical of the notion that the presence of a father would likely have improved his experience:

We hear about absent fathers but not present mothers. A present father wouldn't have helped me at all, if he was modelling harmful behaviour daily. My mother, aunt and grandmother were pretty good at loving. They tried, they failed often. But their ability to love is why I'm talking to you today. (Laymon, quoted in Noor 2018:n.p.)

For Trevor Noah, the comedian and political commentator, the experience of the intersection of single-mother family structure and young masculinity did not seem to be as much a consideration as race growing up in South Africa. In his memoir (Noah 2016) he reflects upon his single mother's attempts to show him how to live unbounded by what W.E.B. Dubois (1994[1903]:9) called "the colour line".

As modestly as we lived at home, I never felt poor because our lives were so rich with experience. We were always out doing something, going somewhere... My mum used to take me on drives to fancy white neighbourhoods [...] places black people never went to. She refused to be bound by ridiculous ideas of what black people couldn't or shouldn't do [...] My mum raised me as if there were no limitations on where I could go and what I could do. When I look back I realise she raised me like a white kid – not white culturally, but in the sense of believing the world was my oyster, that I should speak up for myself, that my ideas and thoughts and decisions mattered. [...] The thing that amazed me about her life was that no one showed her. No one chose her. She did it on her own through sheer force of will [...] People thought my mum was crazy. Ice rinks and drive-ins and suburbs, these things were *izinto zabelungu* – the things of white people. So many black people had internalised the logic of apartheid and made it their own. Why teach a black child white things? Neighbours and relatives used to pester my mum. "Why do all this? Why show him the world when he's never going to leave the ghetto?" "Because," she would say, "even if he never leaves the ghetto, he will know that the ghetto is not the world. If that is all I accomplish, I've done enough."
(Noah 2016:73-74)

While Noah's experience is location-specific, I quote it at length because it makes three things clear: first, mothers hold a clear awareness of the social conditions and, fuelled by maternal agency, invest in nurturing and supporting their sons to overcome barriers. Second, it demonstrates the potential of what Morgan (2011, 2019) terms family practices, the everyday and often banal activities which constitute family life, and by extension, broaden sons' horizons, and third, how racially-structured societies create distinctive experiences for some dyads.

This study records Black British mothers' and sons' perspectives on and experiences of the influences of fathers and other senior men. Critique of the male role model discourse is emerging (Tarrant *et al.* 2015), reflecting critical conversations in society about gender. Gender is increasingly being de-emphasised in parenting, and there is a developing critique about the socialisation of children into gendered identities as oppressive (Lewis 2019:119), a position that appears to be influencing growing numbers of parents choosing to raise their children as gender-neutral (Bracken 2020). The fact that some societies do not use gender as an organising principle of social organisation, or deploy gender identity to assign or ascribe roles (see Adu-Poku 2004:259), indicates it may be an arbitrary way of organising families and parent-child relationships. One prevailing perspective which relates to dyads is that a son is more negatively impacted than a daughter by father-separation, due to the loss of the parent with whom it is assumed they most identify (Barrett and McIntosh 2015[1982]:24 and Phoenix 1987:54). However, this view takes for granted that the foundation of parent-child relationships is gender identity, a notion not substantiated by research.

Russell and Sabel (1997) analysed existing literature to uncover the significance of gender within parent-child dyadic relationships. They examined studies on four dyads: mother-son, mother-daughter, father-son and father-daughter, finding that there was limited evidence to suggest these relationships were significantly different from each other. The researchers suggest that rather than gender being fundamental, parent-child relationships were influenced by the individual characteristics of the child and the parent, including "temperament," "personality," and "beliefs and values," (Russell and Sabel 1997:139). Their findings suggest that close bonds between single mothers and their sons can be developed on numerous bases; however, they also identify other factors that influence parent-child relationships, including "sources of stress, social networks, and levels of support" (Russell and Sabel 1997:139). As Chapter 1 showed, much of the concern focused on the gendered socialisation of the sons of single mothers. The literature discussed in this section indicates that a gendered understanding of parent-child relationships is

unhelpful. This suggests that the single mother-son dyad may not be as problematic as it is claimed to be, and the research data will provide further insight.

It is also worth noting here that the importance of racial socialisation for children raised in societies structured by race has been given less analytical attention, signalling an absence of knowledge about the distinctive experience of race (O'Reilly 2001:113; Gunaratnam 2013:259; Bailey-Fokhoury 2014; Rollock 2014; Rollock *et al.* 2015:118-125; Allen 2016). In this study, I examine if or how black single-parent women prepare their children for racism. I suggest that the lack of existing theorisation about the black single mother-son dyad is a harmful gap which not only misinforms policy and practice but can influence the self- and family valuations of mothers and sons. Like the multiple-marginalised subjects whose predicaments were analysed by Crenshaw (1989, 1991) mothers and sons are simultaneously positioned across categories of difference that include race, family structure, class, geography and age. Their absence from empirical research and from what Collins (2019) calls "resistant knowledge projects", means they have not had their experiences and positioning fully theorised (Crenshaw 1989:140).

2.2 Reinterpreting family structure

In this section, I consider alternative frameworks for understanding the single-mother family structure. Intersectional social constructions of single black mother families are constituted of negative tropes of blackness, single-parentness and black womanhood. Queer, anti-racist and feminist literature undermines this subjugation and inferiorisation, unveiling traditional family rhetoric as myth (Barthes 2012, [1957]). Barthes wrote that myth – or example discourse on the constitution of the ideal family – is presented not as a persuasive explanation but as a 'statement of fact (Barthes 2012[1957]:256). In this way, myth works to naturalise and depoliticise the pathologisation of family difference. Family myth, the notion that there is one "healthy" family form – the idealised heteronormative nuclear family – overlooks two things: one, women's exploitation within it (Clark 1970; Firestone 1970; Barrett and McIntosh (2015[1982]:20,23; Davis 2019 [1981]; Lewis 2019) and two, the diversity of family forms (Dickerson 1995a:x; Nelson 2006; Golombok 2015; Reed 2018).

Single-mother families are policed for having transgressed the boundaries of heteronormativity (Oswald, Blume and Marks 2005). Oswald and colleagues describe heteronormativity as an ideology that, apart from heterosexual bias, includes the promotion of "gender conventionality"

and "family traditionalism" (2005:143). This "moral system" disciplines the ways heterosexuality is embodied and performed and encompasses the notion that there is a 'right' way to do family (p.144). A single mother caring for her son as his sole or main caregiver transgresses family and gender conventions. A standard of heteronormativity is the reason why single mothers, as a social category of difference, are regulated through social discipline (Cohen 1997:445). This ranges from denouncements and stigma (McIntosh 1996:148-149) to punitive state policies which cause hardship (Rabindrakumar 2018).

For Oswald, Blume and Marks the destabilisation of heteronormativity requires thinking about family in more enlightened and radical ways, which includes seeing family as a practice, "something we do," rather than something "we have" (2005:152). Family sociologist David Morgan suggests rethinking our understanding of what and who constitutes a family (2011, 2019). Morgan argues that family life, relationships and family-like bonds are created through family practices, and a variety of regular and commonplace activities in private domestic life. The significant actions in the making and recreating of family are found in experiences which are mundane and banal. From Morgan's view, acts such as offering advice, eating a meal together or reading a bedtime story are important in that they "construct", "rene[w]" and "reaffir[m]" relationships (2019:2231). Similarly, Finch (2007) asserts that family members' actions as well as family activities and rituals are significant, as these can demonstrate family bonds and closeness. Morgan (2011, 2019) suggests such actions can create and strengthen bonds between people, including where there is no biological connection. The concept of family practices indicates that it may not be the family structure that is most pertinent to the quality of family life and dyadic relationships, but the everyday activities mothers and sons do together which build and strengthen bonds between them. Indeed, Morgan (2019:2231) acknowledges that functional families are not always conventional.

The concept of family practices is another perspective that is inclusive of diverse family forms, in its recognition that family is created by varieties of individuals, some biologically related, some not, and through everyday actions and reactions. Such perspectives can challenge the hierarchy of families, in which the nuclear family structure is perceived as superior, as it departs from a focus on family form to paying attention to the texture of private family life, and the various ways people do family. Groups and domestic arrangements can be characterised as queer when "humans resist or subvert sex stereotyping" and family convention, transcending biological and legal ties to include other kinds of relationships in their definitions of family (Oswald, Blume and

Marks 2005:152). Cohen (1997:438) suggests the “radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness...[is] in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms”. One such example is the three single-parent women who set up a commune-style home and lived together with their children to fulfil their multitudinous needs for affordable accommodation, for domestic resources, for companionship and for childcare (Ash 2018). Such creative and subversive approaches to living provide a glimpse of the possibilities available to women. Indeed, such an approach could constitute part of a reimagining of how single motherhood can be done.

One view purports that community support of single mothers should be part of any radical reimagining. For example, Asked about the "depressingly large number of single-parent households" in an interview, celebrated author and essayist Toni Morrison spoke back to negative perspectives on single motherhood:

I don't think a female running a house is a problem, a broken family. It's perceived as one. Two parents can't raise a child any more than one. You need a whole community – everybody – to raise a child. The notion that the head is the one who brings in the most money is a patriarchal notion, that a woman – and I have raised two children, alone – is somehow lesser than a male head. Or that I am incomplete without the male. It just doesn't work... Why are we hanging onto it? I don't know. It isolates people into little units – people need a larger unit.

(Morrison, quoted in Angelo 1994:259-260)

Feminist scholars have highlighted dynamic ways of doing family among black populations, showing the options available to women. Creative kinship has long been a remedy to the challenges faced by mothers (Reynolds 2005:33-40). Brewer (1995) shows how collective living and kinship have long been at the centre of black urban life, sustaining individuals psychologically as well as materially (1995:171). Types of “transgressive care” in black communities include other mothering (Collins 1991:119-122 and Anim Adoo 2014:53), pluralist parenting (Lewis 2019:149-150), and child-shifting (Pottinger 2005; Reynolds 2005:38). These forms of care highlight the possibility of multiple caring relationships in the lives of the children of single black mothers (Lewis 2019:149-150), beyond the single mother-child dyad. In Toni Morrison's view, there should be more social support offered to young single-parent women:

[T]eenage mothers can be teachers. They can be brain surgeons. We have to help them become brain surgeons. That's my job. I want to gather them all in my arms and say, "your baby is beautiful and so are you and, honey, you can do it. And when you want to be a brain surgeon, call me – I will take care of your baby. That's the attitude you have to have about human life".

(Morrison, quoted in Angelo 1998:260-261)

Thinking about the ways single black mother families are devalued, raises the question of whether attitudes will shift when there is a greater acknowledgement that marginalised women "contribute to society through their mothering" (Erel and Reynolds 2014:110), and that each child's life matters. Indeed, single mothers are raising the next generation. Toni Morrison's ethos is reflected in the African idiom "every child is my child" (Langa 2010:519), borne out in cultural practices where children have many parent figures. Such caring practices are often sustained within the black diaspora.

Alternative forms of care can also be found in gay and lesbian communities in which family and parenting arrangements are reimagined; these include "open adoption," "radical creches" and "queer co-parenting" (Lewis 2019:147). This literature shows that the potentialities of care for children are only as limited as the collective imagination. This present study uncovers caring-related challenges experienced by single-parent women and explores if and how these are overcome. It has been suggested that if single mothers lack social support, then it is down to the failures of society and the community (McIntosh 1996; McIntosh and Barrett 2015 [1982]). McIntosh and Barrett (2015 [1982]:80) further argue that social organisation based on private family households — the "little units" to which Morrison refers above (Angelo 1994: 259-260) — work to reproduce inequality and weaken community ties. McIntosh asserts that "caring, sharing and loving would be more widespread if the family did not claim them for its own" (McIntosh 1996:155). McIntosh asserts that:

[The family] reproduces advantage and disadvantage, but it even more seriously disadvantages those who have small or weak families. So, if single mothers are stretched and disadvantaged it is because the family is such a privileged site of caring and mutual aid. It not only makes the rest of society seem bleak and unwelcoming, but it also weakens the non-familial networks that might provide support and comfort.

(McIntosh 1996:155)

This raises the question of what a society better organised for collective “caring, sharing and loving” might look like. The absence of a “resistant knowledge tradition” for family structure means this has not been articulated. McIntosh (1996:156) raises other important questions: “why are women, rather than men, taking so much responsibility for children? And at the level of society: why are there no perceived alternative forms of households or support networks?”. These problems are addressed in the topic to which I now turn.

2.3 Women’s excessive responsibility

The experiences of separated men and women who share children are deeply gendered. Mostly it is women who undertake responsibility for children after a relationship breakdown, reflected in the fact that 90% of all single parents in England are women (Gingerbread 2019). In sociology of the family literature, feminists have long problematised the inequality women experience in the home and within the family, including an excessive responsibility for domestic labour (Chambers and Gracia 2022:37). That mothers take on more than a fair share within heterosexual nuclear families has also been critiqued (hooks 1984; Schwarz 1994; Adichie 2017; Lockman 2019; Luthar and Ciciolla 2015). Arguably, single motherhood might be a more accurate image of the gendered asymmetry of labour between parents. The realities of how the division of caring labour operates between separated mothers and non-resident fathers are underresearched. Working mothers balance work and childrearing (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]; Hochschild 2012[1989]; Reynolds 2005:99-103; Dow 2016) as well as informal responsibility for domestic tasks (Luthar and Ciciolla 2015). In the context of this imbalance, it is surprising that it is not questioned more often how single-parent women manage, given all they do, as well as the various difficulties they face (Edin and Lein 1997; Crittenden 2004). Bryan and colleagues outline a related problem the intersection of race, gender and family structure:

The reality today is that many black women do bring up their children, and the children of other relatives, on their own. It is our mothers and other women who provide support which the men so often fail to give us, reflecting a long tradition whereby responsibility for our children has been shared. Recognising this reality does not, however, mean that we would wish to romanticise the role played by black women who raise their children without the support of a man. We do not raise our families in this way because we are superwomen [...] but because we have been compelled to accept this responsibility [...] There is no power or respect to be gained from performing such a task, particularly in a society which invalidates any family structure which does not conform to the nuclear model.

(Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018 [1985:221])

While arguments for the equal sharing of care between mothers and fathers are longstanding (hooks 1984; Hochschild 2012[1989]; Schwarz 1994:145-178; Lockman 2019), the gendered asymmetry in care work remains largely naturalised and depoliticised. There also remains a need for attention to the experiential gap between single-parent women and non-resident fathers at the intersection of family structure/gender. This research attempts to contribute toward the closure of this knowledge gap, in its account of black single-parent women's excessive responsibility for childrearing, and all the types of labour this entails.

There is much evidence in the literature to suggest that parenting children of colour in societies structured by race is a qualitatively distinctive experience for parents (Lorde 2007[1984]; Gunaratnam 2013:258-259; Rollock 2014; Rollock *et al.* 2015). Bhavnani and Coulson (1997) note:

...black and white mothers may have completely different experiences and perceptions of the oppressive nature of the state. The worries black mothers may have about children being late home from school can be as much to do with fears of police harassment as with fears of sexual assault.

(Bhavnani and Coulson 1997:60-61)

In addition to distinct concerns and experiences generated by race, there are other considerations. Yasmin Gunaratnam observed the challenges mothers faced when mothering "in a racist world" in her research with British Bangladeshi mothers (2013:259). Gunaratnam

suggests that the practices of mothers could be characterised as “inoculation,” in their careful management of children’s “controlled exposure to threatening realities such as racism... to build up a child’s resistance and resilience to anticipated racism in the future” (Gunarathnam 2013:259). Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) dedicate an entire chapter in their book on black women’s experiences to a discussion of raising black children within societies organised by race. For them, a large dimension of this task is children’s racial socialisation which involves raising a child to be self-loving, to “have positive feelings about and connections with the black community and to be “competent and successful in the broader society while carefully navigating bigotry and discrimination” (p.239). They go on to highlight the multitudinous dilemmas raised by the challenges of having to discuss these social issues with a child:

Black mothers struggle to achieve the right balance between educating their children about race and racism so that the child feels good about herself and is realistic in her approach to the world and overwhelming the child, such that she gives up altogether. They must decide how long to wrap her in a cocoon, be it by enrolling her in an Afrocentric learning academy, or simply staying silent on the subject of bigotry, and when they must expose the child to life’s inequities. And they constantly wonder: *How much is enough? What can a 6-year-old handle? What must a 12-year-old be aware of?*
(Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003:240)

Empirical research demonstrates that protecting black children may require mothers’ labour in ways such as advocacy in schools (Archer 2010; Chapman and Bhopal 2013:576-577; Bhopal 2014), and image management (Dow 2016) to protect children from negative attention in public, and for campaigning against injustices such as racial violence (Lawrence 2006; Elliot-Cooper 2019), a distinctive intersectional experience at family structure/race/gender. This study considers the nature of additional parental labour when raising sons racialised as black. Such additional labour is hidden and unacknowledged at a societal level, in the context of continued denial of the significance of racism (Kapoor 2013; Eddo-Lodge 2017). Current conversations about the inequity of gendered experience between heterosexual parents do not capture the range of experiences of mothers who are multiply subordinated due to their intersectional positioning. The concept of mental load (see Emma 2017b:4-21), makes visible the invisible work done by women in thinking through, planning for and organising domestic life, including care work. Focus on the mental load at the intersection of race/gender would illuminate the evolving concerns which preoccupy the mothers of racialised children.

It has been argued that there is a 'cultural cover-up' in representing a woman appearing to balance competing demands as a superwoman (Hochschild 2012[1989]; Reynolds 1997; Dow 2015). These authors have argued that the social construction of certain mothers as superwomen conceals strain and gendered inequity. Such depictions of mothers as superwomen can arguably be characterised as a form of propaganda which serves to naturalise and depoliticise gendered double standards in parenting. Reynolds (1997) observes how the trope has been applied to black women:

The "black superwoman" is an image fabricated by the press that has little to do with the reality of black women's lives and the social realities faced by them. Nonetheless this image has been accepted by the public and now assumes a common-sense reality. Even among academics she is celebrated as a positive social phenomena. However the 'black superwoman' in Britain is constructed in essentialist terms (such as her natural qualities of resistance)...[it has] the effect of deflecting attention away from more substantive issues that concern black people... (Reynolds 1997:110)

The caring labour that women do in private (Luthar and Ciciolla 2015) has been depoliticised and naturalised as a labour of love. Questions about whether women "have the right to pursue careers, to live independently from men and raise children on their own" are bound up in the politics of gender (Silva 1996:1-2). Related to these questions is the view that single-parent women are the victims of patriarchy. It could be said that in taking on excessive responsibility in raising children, women inadvertently support fathers who are free to work and earn, participate in recreational activities and generally prioritise their well-being. The experiential gap between single mothers and non-resident fathers is a form of gendered oppression. In the context of this gendered injustice there have been calls for the socialisation of childcare (hooks 1984; McIntosh and Barrett 2015[1982]; Lewis 2019), and its centring within social life. hooks discusses the potential of this:

Childcare is a responsibility that can be shared with other childrearers, with people who do not live with children. This form of parenting is revolutionary in this society because it takes place in opposition to the idea that parents, especially mothers, should be the only childrearers. Many people raised in black communities experienced this type of community-based childcare... This kind of shared responsibility for children can happen in small community settings where people know and trust one another. It cannot happen in settings if parents regard children as their "property," their

“possession”... if there were less emphasis on having one’s “own” children and more emphasis on having children who are already living and in need of childcare, there would be large groups of responsible women and men to share in the process of childrearing... Before there can be shared responsibility for childrearing that relieves women of the sole responsibility for primary childcare, women and men must be willing to accept that parenting in isolation (irrespective of the sex of the parent) is not the most effective way to raise children or be happy as parents. Since women do most of the parenting in this society and it does not appear this situation will alter in the coming years, there has to be renewed feminist organizing around childcare.

(hooks

1984:144-146)

Such practice would provide children with a range of relationships supportive of their development. It could also liberate women to live more fully and further contribute to society. For multiple reasons, it is not desirable for mothers to be tied to children. Lewis critiques the notion that children “are ours and ours alone, to guard, invest in and prioritise” (2019:118). She notes that 1970s feminist science fiction worlds were imagined by authors in which adults of all genders were responsible for child-rearing labour (2019:150). Recognising interdependence and a need for co-operation seems important to resolving this social issue. It is important to acknowledge that social divisions among mothers by race and ethnicity, class, age and family structure may be precluding solidarity (Rose 2018:33), preventing the organisation needed to demand social change and transformation. What is known about mothers’ and sons’ societal experiences is explored in the following section.

2.4 Black mothers and sons in social context

Scholars have long argued that the single black mother family is not inherently dysfunctional (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]; Dickerson 1995a, 1995b; Randolph 1995; MacCallum and Golombok 2004; Reynolds 2005; Drexler 2005; Nelson 2006). Psychologist Boyd-Franklin argues that a wide range of factors mediates if, or the degree to which, a family is “well-functioning” (1989:191-204). Interestingly, a lot of these critical studies have been carried out by black women. Due to race/gender norms in spaces of discursive power, there has not been a critical mass to shift the ways the single-mother family is defined.

The risk of poverty is the most pressing issue of single motherhood (Harkness 2018; Härkönen 2018). Research has shown that the families' economic health is a pivotal factor for family members' well-being; financially stable families avoid a strain that negatively affects a mother and in turn her children (Randolph 1995:120). Economic stability has been found to enhance mothers' self-esteem and mental health (Kalil *et al.* 2000:207). Beyond the factor of a sole parent's income, Boyd-Franklin (1989:191-204) suggests the mother's educational attainment and the nature of the family's support network is significant. Suzanne Randolph notes the wider community can make an important contribution to the lives of single-parent women and their children: formal spaces such as churches and mosques may offer "educational and recreational activities", "parental support", "transportation" and "assistance with daily needs such as childcare" (1995:31). Randolph also identified the benefits support groups could offer single-parent women:

Support groups or community-level support are needed for mothers cut off from family or friendship networks. Support groups can assist mothers in reframing their parenting situation and identifying family strengths. To assist mothers' varied roles without taxing their children to assume adultlike roles, the support networks could also provide childcare for mothers, trade services for household management, and assistance for mothers and their adolescent children in job searches. These groups could also assist mothers with parent-child communication... That is, the support group could provide an outlet for mothers to discuss their problems and worries and to generate solutions or strategies for coping. (Randolph 1995:140-141)

An example of such an organisation is the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers, founded in Brooklyn, New York, in the 1970s (Laing 1986; Matin 1986). The Sisterhood works to assist single-parent women through a range of activities and services, from support groups for mothers and for fathers, counselling, and housing solutions, including at its property, Kianga House, which offered long-term residence in self-contained units. Kianga House also offered mothers intensive training in "self-sufficiency skills, personal awareness/development, child development, home management" (Matin 1986:49). The Sisterhood took a "holistic" approach in assisting a mother, "addressing the full spectrum of her needs," working with the ethos of "accepting her not on the basis of who she is when she walks through [the] door, but on the basis of what she has the capability of becoming" (Laing 1986:n.p.). Matin, a project coordinator, at the Sisterhood, details their interpretation of single black motherhood which is shared with service users through workshops:

Not *unwed*: No one should be defined by their particular marital status, or be forced into substandard living because they do not choose to remain in unhealthy relationships.

Not *illegitimate*: Regardless of the circumstances of a child's birth, he or she is here. "To impose a negative label on a child is to say to that child that you do not expect much from them. Positive descriptions coupled with high expectations are key to motivating our children.

Not *fatherless*: Simply stated, why define a household by who is not there? A family does not cease to exist because one parent isn't there. How about *motherfull*?

Not *powerless*: The Sisterhood teaches women that they are not powerless; that despite their struggles they are not helpless, and that for the sake of their families they can say, "No!" to unhealthy relationships, to substandard living conditions and inequality in education. (Matin 1986:50-51, emphasis in original)

The example of the Sisterhood not only demonstrates the radical potential of positive social action in communities, but also gives an indication of what a resistant knowledge tradition on family structure could constitute, which is why I quote it at length. This present study pays attention to the community resources and ideas mothers and young men draw upon.

Dyads may receive support from kin. It could be said that among black populations the family forms is more flexible, and often includes a prominent role of extended kinship networks (Chambers and Gracia 2022:60-63). The literature indicates that single black mother families tend to function as part of a wider kinship network (Stack 1974; Reynolds 2005). As Hill Collins points out, the Western practice of defining family by household membership ignores other important relationships (1987:4). For example, grandparents may play significant roles in the lives of single-parent mothers and children. There is a view that terms such as "single" mother are arguably a misnomer, obscuring the important support that may be provided by active, non-resident fathers, relatives, including the family of children's fathers, family friends, neighbours and community members (Boyd-Franklin 1989; Golden 1995; Randolph 1995; Mendenhall, Bowman and Zhang 2012). It is important to note that not all African and Caribbean heritage families have the support of an extended family locally or even in the same country (Sewell 2009:24). Such circumstances may mean heavier burdens upon a mother and the isolation of her family unit.

A support network and the sense of a supportive 'village' which participates in the care and support of children in a single-mother family are also of key importance for both single mothers and young people (Boyd-Franklin 1989; Randolph 1995). I sought to find out if mothers and dyads had such networks, and if so, the nature of these, and any impacts arising from the absence of a supportive network. It is also important to recognise that the constitution of networks can influence the life direction of young people. In Pattillo-McCoy's ethnographic study (1999, 2000) of an African American middle-class neighbourhood and its residents highlighted that connections to relatives and friends who held contrasting values and made divergent choices could undermine any positive ethos established in the family home. Pattillo-McCoy's research shows some black young people straddling two different worlds.

Thinking about the involvement of fathers, it has been repeatedly pointed out that the active role played by many black fathers who do not live with their children is unacknowledged (Mott 1990; Randolph 1995; Jarrett 1994; Reynolds 2005; Lee 2013a, 2013b). As Randolph (1995) argues non-resident fathers have often been confused with 'absent' fathers. Research evidence signals that statistical measures of household composition obscure the presence, action, engagement and persistence of such men, despite sometimes challenging circumstances (Liebow 1967[2003]; Mott 1990; Dazinger and Radin 1990; Reynolds 2009; Lee 2013a, 2013b). Indeed empirical, qualitative studies by Liebow (1967[2003]), Reynolds (2009) and Lee (2013a, 2013b) illustrate that such fathers are normally present and engaged in the lives of their children to some degree. Research by Tracey Reynolds (2009) with non-resident black fathers found that while their level of contact and commitment varied, the majority of fathers worked hard to sustain their relationships with their children. These fathers were frustrated by their representation as 'bad' fathers (p.17-18). One research participant, Phillip, commented:

Everyone thinks we [black fathers] don't care about our children. We just have them, leave them and move on. I want to say to everyone "we're not like that, open your eyes and you'll see plenty of... good [fathers], who are trying to be there for their children," but no one is interested in what we have to say, so the stereotype remains.

(Research participant and father, Phillip, quoted in Reynolds 2009:17)

To be clear, this is not to deny incidents of father absence in some black families, which also occur in other populations, but to indicate the focus on this phenomenon within black populations may have been disproportionate (Reynolds 1997:104). Research evidence suggests non-resident

black fathers living separately from their children are often more engaged and remain engaged longer, than non-resident fathers in other ethnic groups (Carlson and McLanahan 2002, cited by Lee 2013a:n.p.). It has been suggested) that "flux" may be a more appropriate term to characterise fathers who are neither "absent" nor "present" (Mott 1990). Indeed, Mott (1990) argues that conceptions of the family should be broadened to include the variety of fathering experiences children have, from those of non-biological father figures to visiting fathering. Despite such insights, representations of everyday black fathering in the UK and US remain distorted by myth. As suggested (Phoenix 1987:54; Reynolds 2009:25), the degree to which non-resident fathers contribute to their children's development requires research attention and policy support. An absence of a father within the family household has been equated with the complete absence of any male figures in a child's life (Randolph 1995), an approach that potentially ignores other important relationships:

Are we truly to believe that in such situations there exists a complete absence of male family members in the lives of these children? What about the step-fathers, uncles, grandfathers, brothers, and male cousins? In Caribbean cultures such men-folk traditionally provide a valuable resource and social support to single mothers in socializing young boys into culturally prescribed notions of manhood and masculine identities. (Reynolds 2010:18)

Research has also highlighted the importance of the socio-economic contexts of the neighbourhoods in which black families live. For instance, the ground-breaking study by Rollock and colleagues (2015) on Black British middle-class families' approaches to education found that parents strategically chose neighbourhoods they believed would shield their children from the perceived negative influences of "working class blackness" (p.59-60) due to concerns about what some sociologists call "moral danger" (Jefferson and Jarrett 2010:26). Rollock and colleagues note the specific concerns parents held particularly about their sons, who might be lured by 'road life' (see Gunter 2008; Bakkali 2019). Due to financial constraints, a single mother may not be able to avoid neighbourhoods regarded as undesirable when in search of affordable family accommodation. A challenging local landscape may have certain repercussions for black boys. Overlooked in discussions about dyads, this study will examine the impact of such constraints.

There is a need for constructive knowledge about young black men. Narratives about the lives of young black men typically assume a pessimistic if not fatalistic tone. Knowledge about young

Black British men living conventional lives is largely missing from academic literature (with exception, see Alexander 1996). Young black men whose lives do not are underrepresented in academic and popular representations (Allison 2008; Byfield 2008). The dominance of limited and negative depictions can serve to prevent optimism as well as self-help and informed social action (Randolph 1995). For the scholar and activist, Gus John, this is a limiting narrative:

When black youths read about themselves it goes something like this: you are a persistently underperforming group; you are six times more likely to be excluded from school and be a young offender; you may be in a gang, or likely to join one. The likely causes of your condition are absentee fathers, absence of role models, and being surrounded by women who can't control or motivate you.

(John, quoted in Allison 2008:n.p.)

These discourses have ramifications. They can work to affect how individuals view themselves, their family structure and their life chances, as well as to shape policy and how young men are perceived and handled by those in authority.

Resistance to such distortions is growing, with young black people increasingly speaking back to the misrepresentations attempting to define them. Freeman-Powell (2019:n.p.) writes about the 56 Black Men project led by Cephus Williams which uses images of black men with "positive life stories" in black hoodies to challenge raced and gendered tropes that criminalise and demonise them. Publicised on social media and billboards, the campaign aims to remind people that "for every black man you see represented doing something negative, there are 56 of us that aren't" (Williams, quoted in Freeman-Powell 2019:n.p.). Similarly, a series of photographs by Olumide Osinoiki entitled "Identity Matters" responds to racist preconceptions. Each image focuses on a black youth with a post-it note attached; on each post-it note is an assertive message; "you don't have to cross the street" is one, referring to the fearful responses of passers-by, and "I am not a failure," is another (Le Marechal 2019:n.p.). One youth group, Reclaim, wrote an open letter to the media, contesting the portrayal of young black people, following media presence in their neighbourhood after the murder of 15- year-old Jessie James:

We are a group of 14-year-old boys from the Reclaim project; since the project started we have been approached by so many different newspapers, magazines and TV companies most of who want to talk to us about guns and knives and gangs. We keep trying to explain that we are not involved in gangs and crime; we're black boys doing positive things in this area – and then journalists go away, as they tell us that's not the story people are interested in... Negative stories of young black boys as criminals, or victims of crime, reinforces the idea that this is the reality for black people. Some young black boys will try and live up to the images they see in the media. Adults constantly criticise teenagers for being irresponsible, but the way the media tries to represent our area as if everyone was a drugs runner or gangster is totally irresponsible and morally wrong.

(The Reclaim Project, quoted in Allison 2008:n.p.)

Limited and distorted representations of black inner-city young people have been frustrating due to the contradiction between these intersectional social constructions and the heterogeneous and multidimensional realities of black youth (Allison 2008). As previously stated, it has been claimed that the single-mother family structure is a causal factor in negative divergent outcomes among black populations, though research evidence contests this. Byfield's empirical research (2008) with young black male university students in the UK and US found individuals were subject to factors typically used to explain so-called educational underachievement, such as living in difficult neighbourhoods and single-parent family structure, but were academically successful within these circumstances. This indicates that such circumstances do not prevent positive outcomes, and that causal explanations must be more searched for. Byfield details the personal characteristics and factors that facilitated black boys' educational achievement including: "personal drive," "self-belief," and "navigating friendship groups." (2008:101-112). Byfield's research also notes the importance of mothers' support specifically, a conclusion supported by other studies which have had similar findings (Hrabowski, Maton and Greif 1998; Sewell 2009).

Thinking about the social environment that mothers and sons navigate, black people's accounts of their experiences of English schools are emerging. In Bryan and colleagues' recording of black women's experiences of schools, as students and parents, in the 1960s and 1970s, they uncover the racist treatment of children and marginalisation of black mothers in institutional spaces (2018[1985]:70-80). Rapper and writer Akala has reflected upon his time in North London schools in the 1980s and '90s, detailing his differential treatment; he narrates that he was bullied by teachers, and arbitrarily placed in special needs classes (2018:65-88). Opong (2019) analyses

his time at a popular Enfield boys school in the early noughties, highlighting ways in which black students attract negative attention in schools. This ranged from the characterisation of black groups of friends in the playground as “mobs” and setting strict rules to reduce gatherings, to staff pressuring black boys to cut their hair to adhere to rules on ‘smart and conventional haircuts’ (Oppong 2019:187). There is evidence to suggest that black boys have been positioned as inferior students in schools not just due to their racialised gendered identity but also, for some, due to family difference – their single mother-homes (Cooper 2005:180). This is one way in which race, gender and family structure can interact to shape life chances. The film director and artist Steve McQueen has commented on the discriminatory treatment he experienced and witnessed during schooling during the 1980s, seemingly due to students' intersectional positioning. Similar to Akala, McQueen was placed in the least challenging class:

It's divisive and hurtful. It was awful. School was painful because I just think that loads of people so, many beautiful people, didn't achieve because no one gave them a chance, or invested any time in them. A lot of beautiful boys, talented people, were put to the wayside. School was scary for me because no one cared, and I wasn't good at it because no one cared. At 13 years old, you are marked... that's your future.

(McQueen, quoted in Aitkenhead 2014: n.p.)

Insights like these provide glimpses into some realities at the intersection of blackness, masculinity and youth, highlighting factors that may explain why some black youth do or do not ‘make it’. Attempts to resolve this question rarely encompass nuances such as how class and race intersect in experiences of schooling, an exception being the study by Rollock *et al.* (2015). Nor do they unpack the impact of being a child of migrant parents who are themselves learning how to negotiate the system, while simultaneously trying to understand the complex realities of racism. Instead, family difference has been mobilised to make sense of divergent outcomes, as demonstrated by the claims detailed in Chapter 1. But as proponents of intersectionality argue, realities of experience are multidimensional (Combahee River Collective 1977: n.p.; Crenshaw 1989: 139-140).

Attempts to understand differential outcomes of young black men in the UK in areas such as education (Kulz 2015) and employment (Ball, Milmo and Ferguson, 2012), have been linked to complicated experiences of black male identity. There is a notion that there are fewer identity spaces for young black men (Bola 2019a, 2019b) and that this creates pressure to conform to

stereotypical black masculinities. Bola suggests (2019a) such pressure can be resisted but that stereotypes constitute an “omnipresent underpinning”, a constant frame of reference informing narrow social expectations. Mentoring projects for young black boys developed with the view that there is a need for male role models in black communities (Department for Communities and Local Government 2007) are purported to be solutions to such difficulties, due to the prevalence of single-mother family structure among black populations, as well as of limited intersectional media representation of young black masculinity. It has been argued that remedial approaches of mentoring projects for young black boys, while well-meaning, are misdirected (Odih 2002:93, 94; Gilroy 2013b:33). This is because it inadvertently reinforces notions of the inadequacy of black youths and families, problematising them rather than the systemic issues producing unequal outcomes.

Literature that has been inclusive of the experiences of single black mothers has demonstrated their resourcefulness through their various “mechanisms for managing” (Dickerson 1995b:8). A study by Jarrett (1994) found such mechanisms to include mothers’ role flexibility in being the main caregiver as well as the economic provider, re-evaluating expectations of biological fathers, and thirdly, developing supportive coalitions within family and kinship networks for practical support. Other research has highlighted similar practices among mothers leading families as main or sole parents (see Boyd-Franklin 1989; Randolph 1995; Kalil *et al.* 2000; Reynolds 2005).

Black mothers’ perceived ability to manage and even thrive in challenging circumstances has generated the trope of the strong black woman (Collins 1991; Reynolds 1997; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Dow 2015). The strong black woman trope has been problematised for its distortion and potentially harmful influence (Nelson *et al.* 2016; Watson-Singleton 2017). It has been recognised that any ‘resilience’ of black women is necessitated by inequitable social conditions (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009). From this perspective, displays of so-called ‘strength’ by single-parent black women are probably best interpreted as an adaption to structural challenges, for their survival in the context of the intersecting oppressions they are subject to; racism/single-parentism/sexism/classism. The strong black woman trope is closely related to the notion of survival. Scott (1991) suggests the intersectional subjugation of black women in the North American context has necessitated what she calls “habits of survival”:

[This refers] to the external adjustments and internal adjustments and internal adaptations that people make to economic exploitation and to race and gender related oppression. Such habits, first and foremost, are responses to pain and suffering that help lessen anger, give a sense of self-control and offer hope. They can also be responses to unexpected happiness – ways of keeping “good times” going. They work, so oppressed people use them over and over again to defeat pain or prolong pleasure.

(Scott 1991:7)

It is important to find out how Black British single-parent women respond to the challenges they face not just in the hidden domestic context, but also living in London, England’s capital city, renowned for its deep inequalities (Partington 2018). The economic activity of black women has been recorded by scholars (Lewis 1993; Reynolds 2005). While single mothering generally has been stigmatised and denounced for its associations with benefit dependency (see Murray 1990; Millar 1996; Gillies 2007; Tyler 2013), and although black women have been perceived as “typical single mothers” (Phoenix 1996:185), there is evidence that black women’s rates of employment are relatively high and that black women are less likely to depend on state provision (Reynolds 2005; Phoenix 1996). For instance, rates of employment among black women in the UK have at times been found to be higher than those of white women (Phoenix 1996:185-186): as many as 77% of all women of Caribbean origin in the UK are employed in full-time work (Reynolds 2005:97). This signals that the situations of single black mothers may be different to how they are assumed to be. Writing in a different geographic context, Collins asserts that this phenomenon exists because “black daughters are raised to expect to work, to strive for an education so that they can support themselves, and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities” (Collins: 1987:5).

The use of state benefits for household income has been found to negatively impact a mother’s self-efficacy, in other words, her belief in her ability to fulfil the demands of her parental role (Kalil *et al.* 2000). The activist and scholar Angela Davis suggests that what single-parent women want to be able to meet the needs of their families is fulfilling and rewarding jobs, as well as affordable, good quality childcare (2019[1981]:213). Black women who resist state coercion and social pressures to be stay-at-home mothers and available to their children risk the stigmatisation of ‘benefit dependency’ in combination with sexist racism (Dow 2015). Paradoxically, as shown in Chapter 1, working black mothers have been problematised also, as is evident in discourses that represent them as neglectful or unable to be supportive (Patterson 1965:296; Scarman 1982:25;

Swann 1985, Lawrence 1982a:78 and Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]:72-73), indicating that black mothers are unable to escape criticism no matter what they do.

The achievements and difficulties of racialised mothers navigating the British system with children have been underexplored. Historically black mothers have placed a high value on their children's education (Hrabowski, Maton and Greif 1998; Cooper 2005; Byfield 2008; Rollock *et al.* 2015), their "educational optimism" (Mirza 2018a) evident in their becoming educational activists (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]), advocates (Chapman and Bhopal 2013; Bhopal 2014), homeschoolers (Puga 2019) and educators in black supplementary schools (Mirza 2018a). Black mothers have struggled against the educational marginalisation of their children (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]; Cooper 2005; Byfield 2008; Gillborn *et al.* 2012; Rollock *et al.* 2015). Research indicates that black mothers have differential experiences of school spaces as parents due to being inferiorised (Chapman and Bhopal 2013; Bhopal 2014). Chapman and Bhopal (2013) found that in the UK, mothers of colour felt relatively unwelcome in schools (p.576-577). In another study of women of colour residing in rural England, Bhopal (2014) found that these women were positioned as outsiders in the doubly white space of the rural school. As black mothers, they did not fit norms of appearance and conduct, and were therefore othered by staff and fellow parents; it was made clear that as black mothers, they did not belong and were not equally entitled. One participant mother, Fumi, a middle-class mixed heritage woman, described her experience at her child's school:

I have noticed with some of the teachers the way they look at me. I think they make certain assumptions about me because of my hair [dreadlocks] and also because of the way I dress. They assume that I am not educated and that I will not be able to engage in a conversation with them and so they sort of look down at me. But I make sure that I am always professional and do not come across as aggressive or any other way. But I do think that they treat the other mothers differently, particularly the white mothers. They show them respect, they listen to them and they take on board what they are saying. (Research participant and mother, Fumi, quoted in Bhopal 2014: 497)

The refusal of legitimacy in the school community may have other ramifications. Mothers may face a dilemma in needing to raise issues with schools about their children's education and wanting to protect themselves from difficult interactions with teachers in which they may be dismissed as "aggressive" (Chapman and Bhopal 2013:576) or undeserving (Bhopal 2014:498).

Moreover, the sexist racism shaping black mothers' institutional experiences may intersect with single-parentism. Rollock and colleagues found black mothers were stereotyped as single mothers, though some participants used drew on their social capital, using their class status to "escape particularly negative intersectional positioning", and to "defen[d] against misrecognition" (2015:99-102). As Eleanor, a mother and research participant explained:

[Y]ou find it helpful sometimes to use your status, what job you do. And people treat you differently. I don't necessarily want to say I do x, y and z, but I found that if you don't say that they treat you in a way, my own experience as a black woman – oh, you're a single parent – there is a category they read off as to who you are without really knowing anything about you.

(Eleanor, Mother and participant quoted in Rollock *et al.* 2015:101)

The ubiquitous and negative signification of single black motherhood may mean mothers are experiencing school spaces and other public institutions differently. It also brings attention to the qualitative nature of their sons' institutional experiences. This study aims to further uncover these.

In conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to outline the landscape of literature which provides a more detailed background for understanding the single black mother-son dyad. This literature review has engaged with work on the gender difference in dyads, critical perspectives on family structure, and women's domestic experiences as well as the social contexts in which mothers and sons live. The literature highlights what perspectives taking a problematising approach to the dyad and family structure appear to have missed: that gender may not determine the quality or efficacy of parent-child relationships; that there are a diversity of ways in which family is done that are not intrinsically problematic; that it would likely be more generative if responsibility for care was more widely shared, and that there is much evidence to suggests the need to rethink assumptions about the natures of black parents and black young people. This literature review has highlighted the absence of empirical studies with a specific focus on the black single mother-son dyad, with the rare exception of Wilson (2014), showing that current understandings are unsubstantiated. As intersectional categories, Black women and children are 'theoretically erased' (Crenshaw 1989:139) and, it can also be said, largely *empirically* erased. Both statements are particularly true for single black mothers and their children who are variously positioned at family structure,

race, gender and class – the dyad and single-mother family structure are not understood because they are simultaneously positioned across multiple categories of difference. This conceals and exacerbates and naturalises the various difficulties they face. This study aims to contribute to the field, and in so doing, to go some way towards filling the gap in knowledge on the dyad and the family structure. How the framework of intersectionality can facilitate this aim is explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 3. Theoretical Framework

This study uses intersectionality (Combahee River Collective 1977; Crenshaw 1989, 1991) as an analytic tool for making sense of the predicaments, ambiguities and potential single black mother-son dyads. An intersectional sensibility can be found in progressive perspectives across history (Collins 2015:7-9; Collins and Bilge 2020:74-78). Intersectionality is broad and complex. This chapter then is an attempt to provide a fuller account of the nature of the framework, of its relevance and to explain what it will do within this project. In the first section, I engage with definitions and interpretations of intersectionality. My discussion is not at all comprehensive but is merely intended to provide a rationale for its use here. I highlight the features of intersectionality which indicate the potential of the framework and consider some of its criticisms. In the second section, I show how single-category analyses have limited research insight, and in the third, illustrate the broadness of my chosen analytic tool. I demonstrate how different intersectional approaches work to uncover overlooked realities, subject positions and social experiences. In the final section, I demonstrate how intersectionality applies to this research project, in that it can facilitate a fuller, more robust account of mothers' and sons' realities, as well as in its flexibility in adapting to different aspects of positionality and intersectional realities. I discuss the basic intersectional model which generally guides analysis in this thesis: race, family structure, gender, and class.

3.1 An overview of intersectionality

Whether or not intersectionality can be classified as a theory is a matter of lively debate (Nash 2008; Carbado *et al.* 2013; Collins 2019; Nash 2008, 2019; Carbado *et al.* 2013). Various descriptions include a "concept" (Collins and Bilge 2020), "a heuristic device" (Collins 2019), "a knowledge project" (Collins 2015:3) and "an analytic tool" (Collins and Bilge 2020:2), there is general agreement that it is in the process of becoming a social theory (Collins 2019; Carbado *et al.* 2013:304, 305-306). Intersectional approaches shed light on a broad range of complex social problems pertaining to forms of social difference and social inequality. An approach for "conceptualising power relations" (Collins 2019:24), intersectionality shows how power relations

including racism, single-parentism, sexism, classism, patriarchy, homophobia and ableism, "wor[k] to exclude or marginalise those who are different" (Crenshaw, 1991:1242). What is distinctive about intersectionality is how it illuminates the interconnectedness of categories typically treated as separate (Brah 1996:14; Young 2000:53; Collins and Bilge 2020:232). It demonstrates how simultaneous categories of difference can co-shape identities, perceptions, life chances and everyday experiences. From this perspective, the effects of categories such as race, family structure or gender are not independent nor pure (Collins 2019:232; Collins and Bilge 2020:226), but relational (Collins and Bilge 2020), in their interconnection and their "mutually shap[ing]" of one another (Walby, Armstrong and Strid 2012:235). The effect on lived realities is to make a "whole life situation unique" Combahee River Collective (1977:n.p.).

Concerned with the workings of "power and marginalisation" (Carbado *et al.* 2013:305) as well as "social inequality" (Collins 2019) and with a history in critical race theory (Carbado *et al.* 2013:303) and feminism of colour (Collins and Bilge 2020:74-86), the roots of intersectionality run deep. Historically there have been various articulations of intersectional analysis. For instance, Collins and Bilge (2019:76) suggest the abolitionism and black feminism of the formerly enslaved campaigner, Sojourner Truth, is one early expression of intersectional sensibility. Truth's 1851 speech 'Ain't I a Woman', articulated interconnected concerns about slavery, women's rights, black womanhood and black motherhood. Another example of such nuanced insight is the analysis of Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe (2018[1985]), black feminists residing in England during the 1980s, whose book *The Heart of the Race* was among the first to document the collective oppression and resistance of black women from migrant backgrounds in England, at varying intersections of gender, race, class, immigration status and geography. Crenshaw's landmark essays (1989, 1991) powerfully demonstrated how the experiences of women of colour were "frequently the product of racism and sexism... [but] tend not to be represented within the discourses of feminism and antiracism" (Crenshaw 1991:1243-1244). Crenshaw explains (in Guidroz and Berger 2009, cited by Collins 2019:26-27) her interest was in illuminating the overlapping nature of "systems of oppression" and "systems of subordination"; understanding "structural convergence" – how systemic inequalities shape each other while working simultaneously, as well as "political marginality," the under-representation of intersectional interests, within long-standing social movements, a topic I return to later in the chapter.

Crenshaw (1989:143) observes that Black women are protected only to the extent that their experiences coincide with those of either of black men or white women: "Where their experiences

are distinct, Black women can expect little protection as long as approaches... which completely obscure problems of intersectionality prevail". In her discussion of how racialised women have fallen through the cracks of social movements, intellectual traditions, social policy and practice, Crenshaw's highlighted the historical blind spots in social movements, This project investigates whether the family structure, as a social category of difference, and single-parentism, as a form of oppression, have been under-considered.

Intersectionality is broader than is usually appreciated (Collins 2019). It can be utilised in examinations of identity politics (see Collins and Bilge 2020) but travels far beyond this. Complex and thus a challenge to clearly define, the articulation within the statement of the socialist, black lesbian feminist Combahee River Collective is instructive:

...we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our task the development of integrated analysis...based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. *The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives* [my emphasis].

(Combahee River Collective 1977:n.p.)

The collective considers each facet of their identity – race, gender, sexuality and class – worthy of examination. They also recognise the interconnectedness of each dimension and that an analysis of this is urgent as the fact is rarely acknowledged or engaged with. Similarly in this study, I consider each key facet of dyads' positioning, including family structure and gender, to explore the experiences of black single mother-son dyads more deeply. I ask new questions about the dyad and family structure, and in so doing, attempt to develop "new angles of vision" (Collins 2019:25). Intersectional approaches are inherently critical forms of inquiry which can challenge well-established knowledge (Collins and Bilge 2020:37). This is important for this project of investigating claims about a stigmatised and inferiorised parent-child relationship and family form. An intersectionality framework is said to expose what has been missed by partial or incomplete analysis (Collins 2019:227).

For Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013:796), intersectionality "foreground[s] the social dynamics and relations that constitute subjects, displacing the emphasis on the subjects and categories themselves as the starting point of inquiry". I understand this to mean that rather than understanding disadvantage and inequality as a natural and inevitable feature of social difference,

for instance, as an expected dimension of lives at axes of race and family structure, intersectionality interrogates the dynamics and power relations implicated (Collins 2019:46). It problematises and politicises experiences of inequality and injustice, fostering “more robust understandings” of these (Collins and Bilge 2020:224) by showing how “intersecting power relations produce social inequality” (Collins and Bilge 2020:225), and making visible how social forces which impact lives are at work at both micro and macro levels. Intersectionality is “multilayered” (Crenshaw 1991:1245), and one way in which intersectional analysis achieves this level of insight is through its recognition of and close attention to relationality (Collins 2019:45-46). Relationality describes the interconnectedness of categories of difference, inequalities and power relations typically treated as separate. Of social relationality in intersectionality, Cho and colleagues state (2013:795) that “[Intersectionality] conce[ives] of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power”.

From intersectional perspectives, racism, sexism, classism, and single parentism “constitute interlocking, mutually constructing, or intersecting systems of power” (Collins and Bilge 2020:226). For Collins and Bilge (2020:226) there is no “pure” oppression, because “power relations... gain meaning in relation to one another”. For example, racism co-shapes the experience of single-parent family in various ways. For Collins and Bilge 2020:2, categories “are not discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but rather build on each other and work together... while often invisible...affect[ing] all aspects of the social world.” From this perspective, the experience of family structure is not produced by itself but is characterised by an interconnected mix of other categories such as gender, race, class and geography. Intersectional analysis may seem complicated and “overly abstract” (Collins and Bilge 2020:220), but scholars emphasise that it is its complexity which enables it to explain everyday realities, typically of subjugated people (Collins and Bilge 2020:221). As Yuval Davis (2006:19) observes “macro axes of social power...also involve actual, concrete people”, and similarly Brah (1996:102) asserts, “real lives are forged out of a complex articulation of these dimensions”. Relationality describes then how each category of difference or mode of power added to an intersectional model can further enhance understanding of distinctive experiences and realities, because of the multidimensional nature of social life and the interconnection of categories. For instance, adding inner-city residence (geography), to consideration of the intersectional situation of a Black British, working-class, woman (race/class/gender), draws attention to issues around housing, employment and health due to well-known urban inequalities and how these interrelate with race, class and gender.

In this way, intersectionality enhances the "complexity" (Collins and Bilge 2020) of social inquiry, while contextualising social phenomena (Collins 2019:46-47). For Collins and Bilge (2020:221) the framework provides "a way of understanding and explaining complexity, in the world, in people, and in human experiences". As this project is concerned with subjects who are multiply positioned, relationality is a theme of intersectionality drawn on throughout its analysis.

It is worth noting that intersectionality is not without criticism, and I now turn to two problems raised about the framework which are relevant here; the claims that the framework underconsiders intra-group diversity and that there is a lack of clarity on which actors' intersectionality is focused upon.

Some scholars suggest that in the focus on categories and their interaction, the intersectional approach overlooks intra-group differences (Nash 2008:2). There is broad acknowledgement that most categories of difference are social constructions with meaning attached (Crenshaw 1991:1296-1297; Brah 1991:116-117). However, within intersectional work, categories can appear fixed, neat and bounded, which can reify constructs, giving the impression they are real, and inadvertently essentialise groups. The categories race and gender have no biological basis, while class and family structure are cultural constructions which are culturally specific rather than universal. Yuval-Davis (2006:20) underscores the importance of recognising social divisions and categories of difference such as race, gender, class, and family structure as in fact fluid, historically specific and continually being remade at the individual and social level. Still, scholars interested in social justice suggest that because of the real-life effects of these categories (see Crenshaw 1991:1296-1297) we must continue to work with them while undermining them (Gunaratnam 2003:29). Yasmin Gunaratnam (2003:30) acknowledges the difficulty: "the categorising of *all* social identities... is an essentialising and reifying political process" [emphasis in original]. Gunaratnam (2003:29, 31) critically observes that categorising practices can give the impression that difference is a determinant – that categories are homogeneous, sharing "experiences", "practices" and "thoughts" all of which can be understood by their difference, rather than "recognition of multiple forms of beingness". This relates to an idea outlined by Jennifer Nash (2008:12) that intersectionality has tended to focus on black women's oppression and marginalisation, overlooking situations in which black women enjoy advantages and autonomy. The same can be said of the category 'single black mother', a subject position almost uniformly portrayed as hopeless in popular culture. However, as Brah (1996:91) argues, realities are not fixed, nor are "our experiences are not constituted solely within 'oppressions'". To avoid

reproducing neat and limited narratives about the dyad and family structure it was important to be alive to “intra-categorical variation” during the research process.

It has also been claimed that there is a lack of clarity on which social actors are intersectional. Nash observes (2008:9) that black women appear to be intersectionality's quintessential subjects. This raises the question of which subject positions the analytic tool can appropriately explore. That intersectionality is being used in a dynamic way to address a range of social issues (Collins and Bilge 2020:5) and its analysis accordingly takes “many forms” (Collins and Bilge 2020:37) has been largely welcomed. Scholars have added various and numerous categories to the classic race/gender/class model; for instance, a model by Lutz (2002, cited by Yuval Davis 2006:202) uses 14 divisions: "gender; sexuality; 'race'/skin-colour; ethnicity; nation/state; class; culture; ability; age; sedentariness/origin; wealth; North South; religion; stage of social development". Indeed, a principal reason for mobilising intersectionality is its flexibility and its elasticity (Collins 2019:40; Carbado et al. 2013:304). Carbado *et al.* (2013:304) assert that Crenshaw's articulation of the classic race, gender, and class constellation, was "provisional" and is now "in movement", developing and evolving (see also Collins 2019). The view of intersectionality scholars is that the original race/gender/class combination was not meant to be fixed and unchanging, but a starting point; Collins notes (2019:40) a specific combination or number of modalities/categories is not specified. Having initially been used in work about the lives of 'women of colour', intersectionality has broadened to engage “with an ever-widening range of experiences and structures of power”, including different “genders”, “ethnicities”, and “sexual orientations” (Carbado *et al.* 2013:304). The adaptability of intersectionality is reflected in its use in studies exploring black male subjectivity (Carbado *et al.* 2013:311). While it typically examines the situations of the multiply marginalised, the framework "can analyse privileged positions as well as subordinated ones" (Collins 2019:39). This malleability positively indicates that the use of intersectionality for the analysis of single-parent black mother-son dyads is fitting and workable. Collins and Bilge (2020:241) view intersectionality's heterogeneity "as a source of tremendous potential for social change" for the potential it has to generate new critical knowledge. This section has attempted to show the overall benefits of working with a flexible multicategory framework. The following section focuses on the limitations of working with one category to analyse complex social problems.

3.2 The limitations of single-category analysis

This study aims to uncover the social realities of mothers and young men within single-parent families. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, discourses have intimated that any hardship and differential life trajectories experienced by single black mothers and their sons are produced predominantly by family structure as predestined, as family structure as a category of difference is viewed as a negative life-determinant. A connection between inequalities and social injustices is not made and actors are viewed as passive rather than active and as with agency. However, there exists a perspective that one aspect of positioning does not “constitut[e] the whole of life” (Brah and Phoenix 2004:78).

Scholars have been critical of single-category analysis for the way it simplifies complex social realities. For Collins and Bilge (2020:32), lived experience of social inequality “is rarely caused by a single factor”; from this perspective family structure alone would *not* account for the overrepresentation of single-parent black women and young black men raised by them in statistics related to social disadvantage. When the “multidimensionality” of certain lives is not fully conveyed, the result is a distorting effect (Crenshaw 1989:139) because the focus on a single social location fails to represent the difficult and complex realities of social life.

One way to get a sense of the limits of single-category analysis is to consider thought on women’s lives in western societies. When the experience of gender has been examined on its own, the effect of this has been the marginalisation of minoritised women in feminist theory and research (Crenshaw 1989:140, Nash 2008:3, Lorde 2007:117; Collins 2019:104-107). McCall (2005:1775) notes how such approaches to women’s studies and the use of gender as an analytic category resulted in criticism by black and brown women of the “use of *women* and *gender* as unitary and homogeneous categories reflecting the common essence of all women”. Historical failure to engage with women’s lives at varying intersections has meant a neglect of issues such as immigration controls on minoritised women and their families, female genital mutilation and distinctive experiences of single motherhood. Writing on different intersectional actors, Crenshaw (1991:1261) argues that in being “relegated to the margin of experience as by total exclusion”, members of certain categories are “silenced”. Yuval Davis (2006:206) notes that the need for a more intersectional approach to examining lives has been acknowledged:

There has been a gradual recognition of the inadequacy of analysing various social divisions, but especially race and gender, as separate, internally homogeneous, social categories resulting in the marginalisation of the specific effects of these, especially on women of colour. (Yuval Davis 2006:206)

Both McCall and Yuval Davis note how single-category focus has the effect of imposing sameness on members of categories, of essentialising them in the denial of the other categories to which they simultaneously belong, and the varying impacts of these. This position makes clear why social action to improve the situations of 'single-parent families are unlikely to be sufficient to address intersectional difficulties experienced by those simultaneously positioned at the intersections of race, family structure, class and geography. For example, the everyday realities for white, single-parent dyads who are middle-class and reside in a rural location, will largely differ from those of black, single-parent dyads, who are working-class and live in the inner-city. Returning to gender to demonstrate the limits of single-category analysis, Audre Lorde (2007:116-118) highlighted how in feminism there existed a "pretence to a homogeneity of experience". For Lorde in white women's focus on their oppression as women, they ignored "differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age". Lorde's list could have also included family structure. For her, this overlooking of other categories of social division was because an intersectional way of thinking "threatens the complacency of those women who view oppression only in terms of sex"; in such situations, the experience of "women of colour become[s] 'other'", and the minoritised woman, "the outsider whose experience and tradition is too "alien" to comprehend". Lorde's analysis of how white women have theorised gendered experiences could also apply to black men and anti-racism, in terms of how male experience is typically foregrounded with less attention to the experiences and burdens of black women (a point I return to regarding political intersectionality). This notion can also be applied to how motherhood generally and single motherhood specifically is defined, and politically organised around, based on the experiences of white mothers, with black mothers viewed as too different and as outsiders (see Phoenix [1996] and Song and Edwards [1997] for critical analysis).

In a 1996 study on perspectives on single black motherhood, Miri Song and Rosalind Edwards document how the National Council for One Parent Families (NCOPF) and Gingerbread (a national self-help organisation for single parents which went on to merge with NCOPF and has become a national charity) worked to counter pathologising public images of single mothers. When a Panorama documentary called 'Babies on Benefit' was broadcast in 1993, portraying

young single white mothers as immoral and dependent on state resources to provide, the NCOPF mounted a legal challenge over the documentary (1996:240). However, the organisations were reluctant to intervene when single black motherhood was misrepresented, said differently, when single-parentism intersected with racism. Song and Edwards (1996:241) suggest the organisations were careful to advance a “safe” image of single motherhood: “an image of the typical lone mother as a responsible divorced or separated parent, doing her best for her children in difficult circumstances”. Gingerbread and NCOPF also sought to emphasise single-parent families' commonality with normalised families rather than their difference (1996:240-241). The authors show that from these organisations' perspective single black motherhood, with its dominant images and understandings, would undermine their aims, and quote Gingerbread's chief executive's admission (1996:241) that this leaves single black mothers without a public defender: “We're very much a white organisation ... there aren't any large national organisations that can represent the views of the black community. So I wonder if the NCOPF or ourselves would react to something about black lone parents...” This indicates that the approach of the organisations was narrowly focused on one aspect of positionality, and in doing so neglected a part of the population it purported to serve. The organisation politically organised around single motherhood while excluding challenges faced by those at intersections of family structure and race. A possible result of this approach is to reinforce racial inequality among single mothers. As Crenshaw convincingly argues:

[L]imiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group... marginalises those who are multiply-burdened and *obscures claims* that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination.

(Crenshaw 1989:140)

That "claims of exclusion must be unidirectional" (Crenshaw 1989:149), based upon one element of positioning such as gender *or* race *or* family structure, and “not multidirectional”, means the rejection of claims by black, inner-city single-mothers and their children. They are positioned at intersecting and subordinate categories, and therefore under- or ill-considered in social life. In its rejection of binaries, such as single motherhood *or* race, geography *or* gender, this multifocal heuristic facilitates “more robust analyses” (Nash 2008) and is more appropriate for examining “the multi-layered texture“ (Combahee River Collective 1977) of lives. It enables careful attention to distinctive yet overlooked subject positions.

This section has attempted to demonstrate that single-category approaches in theory and practice can have a reductive effect. Such approaches can have a homogenising effect in overlooking other categories in which actors are simultaneously positioned and how these co-shape evolving experiences. This obscures differential experiences of social life and due actors to differing levels of privilege and domination. In the next section, I examine how various forms of intersectionality engage with such issues.

3.3 Relevant types of intersectionality

So far, I have attempted to explain what intersectionality is and begun to indicate why multi-categorical analysis is important. In this section, I discuss three forms of intersectionality relevant to this project: *structural*, how different forms of oppression are imposed systemically, *representational*, how cultural constructions of subjects intersect, and *political*, which explores how intersectional subjects are underserved by well-established social movements, and the problems and opportunities of this fact. This section further elucidates the predicament of dyads and black, single-parent families within theory and practice and the need for intersectional analysis on this topic.

Structural intersectionality

One aim of this study is to try to understand why some single black mother-son dyads have distinctive and unwanted experiences in social life. As detailed in Chapter 1, academic, media and policy narratives which hold the position that single-parent family structure in black populations is inferior and pathological understand such trajectories as produced by family structure. Anti-racist and/or feminist writers have emphasised the role of systemic failure, citing issues such as the impact of the race/gender pay gap on single-mother families, poor neighbourhoods, inadequate schools, differential policing, employment discrimination, and the excessive caring responsibility of mothers. This research interrogates both positions, and structural intersectionality is a fitting analytic tool for the latter position.

Structural intersectionality explains how forms of oppression operating within “systems of power” (Collins 2019:46) - governments, institutions, organisations, and social networks - converge to co-produce forms of privilege and domination (Crenshaw 1991:1245). From this perspective,

social inequalities are *not* an intrinsic part of the social world or subject positionings, as Collins (2019:46) argues:

[T]reating social inequality as a result of other, seemingly more fundamental processes suggested that social inequality was inevitable because it was hardwired into the social world, into individual nature, or into both. Intersectionality rejects these notions.... Instead, [it] points to the workings of power relations in producing social inequalities and the social problems they engender. (Collins 2019:46)

Intersectionality illuminates how oppressions operate systemically through policies, practices and behaviours. Thinking about single mothers as a general category, this operation of oppression can be seen in how social arrangements reflect a wide assumption of family households headed by two parents. This assumption is evident in housing costs, tax benefits and working hours, to name but a few. For Mirza (2018b:2), the social realities experienced by minoritised women are because they "are simultaneously positioned in multiple structures of dominance and power", such as capitalism, patriarchy, ageism, racism and sexism. Crenshaw observes (1991:1297) that the subordinate positions of some actors in the human hierarchy mean occupying subject positions which "power...is exercised against".

Structural intersectionality elucidates black women's experiences of gender inequality (Crenshaw 1991; Brah 1996; Collins 2015:11), which for Crenshaw (1991:1249, 1262) the result of their "intersectional subordination". It could be said that issues which affect black women disproportionately such as underemployment, financial hardship, and responsibility for childcare are the result of structural intersectionality. Indeed, Collins suggests (2015:11) "unpaid reproductive labour", which includes female carers and mothers' excessive responsibility for child-rearing, caring, cooking and cleaning – is at the root of the complex social inequalities they experience. This is a bind difficult to undo at the societal level because black women lack control of the centres which organise social life as well as cultural interpretations of it. Brah (1996:115) rightly problematises "women's exclusion from key centres of political and cultural influence". Structural intersectionality also illuminates how the situations and circumstances of black women are compounded by policies and practices associated with institutional racism. Brah details how this makes the realities of women of colour distinctive:

Black women's experiences of racism in the labour market, the education system, the Health Service, the media and in consequence of a variety of state policies such as those on immigration, policing and social welfare mean that, even when black and white women share a broadly similar class position, they constitute distinctive fractions within that specific class location. Their everyday life experiences will therefore be characterised by... crucial differences. (Brah 1996:88)

Such differential experiences can in turn affect children. In this study, I use structural intersectionality to critically examine dyads' retrospective experiences of navigating society. What obstacles did they face, if any? If so, were these the result of 'simultaneous interlocking oppressions' (Brah and Phoenix 2004:78) working through policy, practice or social arrangements? Analysis of the workings of invisible forces at structural level will address one of the study's research questions: in the social context, to what extent can single black mothers and their children exert control over their lives?

Representational intersectionality

Social divisions and their associated stereotypes combine with negative effects within representations. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991:1245, 1282) argues the importance of *representational intersectionality*, and how cultural constructions of subjects play a key role in reproducing human hierarchy. This could include hierarchies of family structure and parent-child relationships. Within "fields of signification and representation" (Brah 1991:116) the ideal family is located at an intersection of family structure/race/sexuality, in being of nuclear structure, white and heterosexual. As demonstrated earlier in the thesis, the prevalence of single-mother structure among African- and Caribbean-heritage populations in Britain, is one distinctive difference between these and all other ethnic groups in England (ONS, 2019a). This has come to function as a signifier of cultural difference and has been imbued with negative meaning. This meaning is intersectional, comprising combinations of pathologies of blackness, of working classness, of black womanhood and of single parenthood.

There are millions of women today who remain marginalised, treated as a 'problem', or construed as the focal point of a moral panic... women whose bodies...[are] criminalised, racialised, disciplined and regulated *through a myriad of representational regimes* and social practices.

(Brah and Phoenix 2004:77 [my emphasis])

What Brah and Phoenix describe is strongly relevant to single black mothers and their households. "Representational regimes" perpetuate stereotypes which naturalise and depoliticise discrimination and unequal outcomes while certain social practices can work as a form of social control. One example of this is health services' disproportionate emphasis on contraception within low-income and/or migrant communities with high rates of single motherhood.

Another potential effect of intersectional representation is its possible impact on dyads' perceptions. Brah (1996:117) suggests how actors interpret their circumstances will be influenced by "cultural constructions", and by "the political repertoire of cultural discourses available". For Brah (1996:117) the effect of intersectional representation on subjects is "unpredictable" in that rejection, ambivalence or accommodation, and a mix of these are possible. While there is no way of knowing how much research will be used, the constructive knowledge generated by my study and others like it can be drawn upon in raising questions about negative constructions and cultural images.

Political intersectionality

The social experiences and claims of single-mother black families have been underrepresented in the political sphere. This is because certain intersectional subjects "[a]ll through the cracks" of well-established social movements (Collins and Bilge 2020:3), due to the distinctive specificity of their positioning. Positioned at family structure/race/gender/class, this family type occupies a multiply-marginalised position and does not fit neatly within social movements. This is the quandary for black inner-city single-mother families and single black mother-son dyads. The needs of a multi-category group tend to be obscured within the discourses of well-established, single-issue movements (Crenshaw 1991:1299) such as anti-racism, feminism and 'anti-single-parentism', meaning circumstances and needs are seldom articulated at societal level. For Crenshaw (1991:1243) categories of difference such as this "face limited options of political communities formed either around ethnicity or around gender, rather than political action that

engages with the particular difficulties at the intersection". As Collins and Bilge (2020:3) state, more intricate frameworks are required to grapple with the complex, tangled nature of the social forces impacting intersectional subjects. For instance, the lack of a logical or specific political home for single-parent black women due to their intersecting statuses – black, woman, mother, and single-parent – means they risk "wait[ing] in the unprotected margin" until their cause is taken up by the main movements (Crenshaw 1989:152). As intersectionality practitioners note (Crenshaw 1989; Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013:79; Carbado *et al.* 2015:305), some distinctive social categories are in the difficult position of being perceived as too close to more recognised categories to represent themselves but too different to be representative of categories.

As discussed above there have been long-established organisations in England advocating for the rights and entitlements of single-parent families, as well as against single-parentism. However, the focus solely on single motherhood has not significantly changed how black women, who comprise a significant portion of single parents in the UK (ONS 2020), experience single motherhood. This is because their experiences are shaped by race and other categories. Like the status of single parents, Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013:79) discuss how in narratives of equality and discrimination, "black" or "female" are perceived as fully inclusive and universal while in contrast, focus on black females is "rendered partial, unrecognisable". While the unique experiences of black single-parent women and their children may be viewed as unique, they are indicative of the predicaments of multiple groups, such as those on a low income, young people, women, black people, mothers, single parents and families residing in the inner-city. Intersectional insight is important for far-reaching interventions for equality and justice (Crenshaw 1991:1246).

Thinking about possible reasons why the issue of family structure may have been underrepresented in anti-racism or black equality movements, there is a notion that the interests of adult black men have "define[d] as well as confine[d] the interests of the entire group.... [and] determine[d] the parameters of anti-racist strategies" (Crenshaw 1991:1252). This works to obscure the claims of other black subjects, such as single-parent women and children (Crenshaw 1991:1252; Carbado *et al.* 2013:311). Carbado *et al.* (2013:310) suggest a need to depart from the understanding of black men as "exceptionally burdened and marginalised". Issues of power within political and activist spheres result in "the dominance of a particular...set of priorities...[which] continu[e] to marginalise the needs of women of colour" (Crenshaw 1991:1265). Indeed, for Luke Harris (2013, cited by Carbado *et al.* 2013:311) there is a need for a black politics that acknowledges and organises around "the linked fates of black men and

women". For Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991:1253, 1262) "strategic silences within feminist and anti-racist movements" work to "reproduce intersectional subordination" which ultimately impacts the life chances of black women who are single parents and their children. Crenshaw (1989:152) suggests certain subjects are only protected to the degree to which their experiences "are recognisably similar to those whose experiences tend to be reflected in antidiscrimination doctrine".

For there to be no obvious intellectual and activist space for a social category might be a space of relative under protection, but it is also a space of potentiality for agency, for resistance and for empowerment (Crenshaw 1991:1297) and "new subjectivities" (Collins 2019:26). This could be the case for single-parent black women, who are arguably an underutilised group. Their autonomy and their courage in the context of social inequalities and injustice have been largely unacknowledged and underexplored. Lola Young (2000:56) suggests that some single-parent black women, in the ways they live, can be viewed as emancipated figures who are "undermining patriarchal heterosexist capitalism". Like the black lesbians about whom Audre Lorde writes (2007:121) they "are no longer dependent upon men for the self-definition [and thus] may well order our whole concept of social relationships". Under-engagement with single black mother families precludes a chance to develop "new angles of vision" (Collins 2019:25) as well as to more fully empower similar categories. As Audre Lorde rightly argues (2007:122): "we must recognise differences among women... and devise ways to use each others' differences to enrich our visions and our joint struggles". McCall also suggests there is constructive potentiality in intersectional analysis:

[T]he project of deconstructing the normative assumptions of these categories contributes to the possibility of positive social change....many feminist researchers employ this type of analysis because of their belief in its radical potential to alter social practices... to enable a politics that is at once more complex and inclusive.

(McCall 2005:1777)

Despite all these progressive possibilities there currently remains no "resistant knowledge tradition" (Collins 2019:10, 88) developing theory and practice at the intersection of family structure and race. As mentioned, this is a surprising gap in the academic literature, not only given how much single parenting in black populations features in popular culture, political rhetoric and

academic work, but also given the numerous “modes of intellectual resistance” (Collins 2019:289) which presently exist, as highlighted by Collins:

Gender, race, ethnicity, nation, sexuality, ability, and age are not just categories designed to make intersectionality more user friendly... these terms also reference important resistant knowledge traditions among subordinated peoples who oppose the social inequalities and social injustices that they experience. (Collins 2019:10)

For Collins and Bilge (2019:43) the intersectional approach is ultimately "a tool for empowering people". Such critical knowledge projects can spark or catalyse "resistance projects" and social movements (Collins 2019:117). This thesis attempts to contribute to critical knowledge on intersections of blackness, single-parent family structure, motherhood and young masculinity. In the next section, I demonstrate the relevance of intersectionality to this intellectual project.

3.4 Intersectionality, family structure and dyads

Mother-son dyads within black, single-parent and inner-city families are positioned at "intersection[s] of 'difference' " (Brah and Phoenix 2004:83), for instance at the intersection of blackness and single-parent family structure. In this thesis, I mobilise intersectionality to make visible the effects of intersectional subjugation and the structural dynamics which produce experiences of inequality. As observed by Walby, Armstrong and Strid (2012:226), groups positioned at intersections of two or more categories can suffer inattention in politics and theory; dyads are jointly positioned at at least four. For McCall (2005:1774), projects that focus on multiply positioned subjects can be understood as *intra-categorical* intersectional studies; these “focus on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection...in order to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups”.

This framework enables attention to the predicaments of dyads and of family structure and importantly is “invest[ed] in ‘recovering’ marginalised subjects’ voices and experiences” (Nash 2008:10). Indeed, the malleability of the framework has meant it has been able to attend to a range of concerns among “many racial and ethnic groups, genders, sexual orientations, nationalities, disabilities” (Carbado *et al.* 2013:309). In developing constructive knowledge about the intersection of blackness and single-mother family structure and the dyad, intersectionality can serve to dismantle essentialism, namely single-parentist essentialism. This is urgent as dyads and the broader family structure are typically understood through the prism of stereotypes. This

is due to representational intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991:1245, 1282), as mentioned earlier in the chapter, the limited and often distorted ways in which subjects and experiences at intersections of blackness, single-parent family structure, motherhood, young masculinity and inner-city residence are portrayed within cultural imagery. As Heidi Mirza (2018b:5) opines, actors whose lives do not reflect such cultural imagery are not easily understood. They are also underserved by policy and practice due to erroneous assumptions.

For Collins (1998:63) 'the family' is an ideal site for intersectional analysis. This is not only because of its internal hierarchies of age, income and gender but also how members' identities are experienced through their families' intersectional positioning. The interplay between intersectional identity and intersectional family location shapes experience of the social world and the amount of privilege and resources one holds for negotiating it.

My model of intersectionality for this study expands the classic race/gender/class combination, to incorporate *family structure*. Family structure refers to the various constellations of relations that make up a family. A unit of a mother and children are labelled a 'single-parent family'. Single-parent families are a category of social difference, subordinately positioned to the idealised nuclear family comprised of a heterosexual couple and their children. The study investigates if or how various intersections of blackness, single-parent family structure, motherhood, masculinity, and inner-city residence, shape dyads' experiences. It examines and illuminates the workings of the associated oppressions, namely racism, sexism, classism and single-parentism. Importantly it also examines if or how living at intersections of these gives rise to forms of agency, resistance and empowerment. As mentioned, the term single-parentism makes visible the oppression or differential experiences mothers and children face because of family structure or family difference. I have developed this adaptable model and included within it a speculative term to ensure my analytic tool is fit for purpose and can shine sufficient light on dyads' overlooked experiences. For Yuval Davis illuminating such underrepresented phenomena is critical:

[T]here are some social divisions, such as gender, stage in the life cycle, ethnicity and class, that tend to shape most people's lives in most social locations, while other social divisions such as those relating to membership in particular castes or status as indigenous or refugee people tend to affect fewer people globally. At the same time, for those who are affected by these and other social divisions not mentioned here, such social divisions are crucial and necessitate struggle to render them visible.

(Yuval Davis 2006:203)

Family structure is one social division shaping women's and children's lives which has suffered a relative lack of constructive and ameliorative interest, particularly when it intersects with race. The purpose here is to make this form of social division and its interconnections to others visible.

My interactional model is flexible and adapted to the different focuses of analysis. The basic model of four intersectional categories – race, family structure, class and gender – contracts and expands as necessary and is used in a variety of combinations. For instance, when analysis focuses on sons' experiences, the intersection of masculinity, blackness, inner-city residence and youth might be the most appropriate focus. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, intersectionality as an analytic tool is “flexible” (Carbado *et al.* 2013:304) and “elastic” (Collins 2019:40). The dynamism of the model is vital because as McCall (2005:1773) astutely observes, inequality is constituted of “changing configurations” of oppressions.

The vibrancy of this approach contrasts with a fixity elsewhere. In the previously existing discourses reference is usually limited to one or two categories, specifically single-parent family structure or blackness and single-parent family structure. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, families and dyads have been stereotyped. Mothers and children are not imagined as agentic, critical or active, any divergent trajectories and outcomes which occur were viewed as being, to use Brah's phrase (1996:91), “predestined entities”. From this view, family units and dyads are indistinguishable from one another due to their intra-group sameness, and actors' and their circumstances do not evolve. I suggest that there is *not* one unitary experience of the dyad or family structure as research demonstrates that all families are flexible and fluid, dynamic and active (Reynolds 2005; Golombok 2015). I take the view that actors such as dyads are not passive receptacles of experience but that they can create dimensions of their lives – lived against backdrops of inequality and injustice – through “everyday cultural and political practices” (Brah 1996:117) as well as family practices (see Morgan 2011, 2019).

One question that this study explores is the degree to which mothers and sons can exert control over their lives. This is largely determined by privilege. Privilege is unevenly distributed across populations, influenced by social divisions such as whether one is gay or straight, part of a single-parent or nuclear family, middle-class or working-class, and a member of the majority group or minoritised, and how such modalities of difference co-shape one another. Crenshaw (1991:1250) argues, writing in another context, that it is actors "who are socially, culturally, economically privileged are more likely to be able to marshal... resources" to overcome obstacles. The study will explore if and how dyads' simultaneous structural positioning modifies experience in shaping life chances (see Brah 1991:88).

Turning to thought about the practicalities of analysis using this complex framework, users of intersectionality are encouraged not to overemphasise one category as a primary category. Other modalities should not be 'bought into' analysis, as done in other traditions. They are also encouraged not to treat categories as equivalent to one another as the social nature of each category is unique (Collins 2019). However, as Yuval-Davis explains (2006:19), it is difficult to quantify the influence of a category as each is "intermeshed" with and experienced through one another. Similarly, Yuval-Davis (2006:205) suggests detailing how categories "work institutionally, intersubjectively, representationally as well as in the subjective constructions of identities". I attempt to include such detail in the analysis section of the thesis, Chapters 5 to 8.

It is crucial that my models of intersectionality which variously include race, family structure, class, gender, geography and age can make visible the realities of the single-mother family structure and dyad. In one of Crenshaw's path-clearing essays on intersectionality (1989), reference is repeatedly made to the unfavourable situations for black single-parent mothers and their families. Writing in the North American context, she argues that black families headed by women occupy the bottom rung of the economic ladder, due to inequalities and their intersectional subjugation, and it is only through placing them at the centre of the analysis that their needs will be directly addressed. Crenshaw insists that focus on and action around distinctive groups, such as single black mother families, will bring broad benefits across society:

It is somewhat ironic that those concerned with alleviating the ills of racism and sexism should adopt such a top-down approach to discrimination. If their efforts instead began with addressing the needs and problems of those who are most disadvantaged and with restructuring and remaking the world where necessary, then others who are singularly disadvantaged would also benefit. (Crenshaw 1989:167)

Crenshaw calls (1989:162) for more attention to be paid to the hardship faced by many single black mother families, which she argues must be understood in the context of oppression: "a fuller appreciation of the problems of the Black community will reveal that gender subjugation does contribute significantly to [their] destitute conditions". In Crenshaw's view it is not interactions of family structure, gender, race and geography producing hardship and unwanted outcomes as claims detailed in Chapter 1 imply, but the complex nature of the social conditions and their impacts. It is worth finding out if intersectional analysis of single black mother-son dyads residing in England's capital yields similar insight.

In conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate that intersectionality is an ideal analytic tool for examining the single black mother-dyad. As previously stated, dyads are simultaneously positioned across multiple categories of social difference, including blackness, single-mother family structure, and inner-city residence. I have tried to show that a malleable and multi-categorical theoretical model is most fitting for analysing the distinctive positionality of dyads. In contrast to longstanding perspectives, intersectionality in this context would not begin with problematising family structure as a category of difference. Rather, it examines dyads and the family structure in social context, making visible the role of power relations and oppression. The intersectional concept of relationality makes visible how social divisions such as family structure, geography, and race are co-shaping divergent experiences of motherhood and youth. Structural intersectionality unveils how "simultaneous interlocking oppressions" (Brah and Phoenix 2004:78) operate systemically, put differently, and how interconnected social forces like racism and single-parentism work at the macro level to shape collective experience. In this thesis, this is done while recognising heterogeneity among dyads, and importantly, rejecting notions of intersectional positioning as a life determinant. This study investigates how these dynamics create the conditions dyads live against, but also how mothers and sons respond to these, making space for

the role of agency and resistance. Again, "experiences are not constituted solely within 'oppressions'" (Brah (1996:91).

There is currently no "resistant knowledge tradition" (Collins 2019:10, 88) of blackness and single-parent family structure. As Crenshaw notes, previous silences around positionings at intersections such as family structure, race, gender and class have served to reproduce, to use Crenshaw's phrase, "intersectional subordination" (1991:1249, 1262). This is a space then for "new angles of vision" (Collins 2019:25). Intersectionality can challenge the limitations of existing knowledge in shining a light on the blind spots of longstanding activist movements and intellectual traditions (Collins 2019:26), such as anti-racism and feminism. One dimension of this topic that has been under-considered is the degree to which the experience of the dyad and family structure engenders agency, resistance and empowerment at individual, family and community levels. In its attention to overlooked intricacies, this is something intersectionality can illuminate.

To develop an appropriate framework, I have developed provisional theoretical models of intersectionality which use the speculative terms single-parentism and family structure. This is an endeavour to uncover and untangle the complexities of dyads' experiences. This chapter has outlined the limitations and oversights of existing traditions. New analytic tools are required to yield fresh constructive insight into these long-neglected intersectional positions.

Chapter 4. Research Methodology

The pathologising and distorted narratives from the mid-twentieth century onwards detailed in Chapter 1 showed that dyads and intersectional experiences at the intersection of blackness and single-parent family structure have been mis- and under-represented. were detailed, and Chapter 2 demonstrated the absence of empirical knowledge on black dyads and single black mother families in the literature. Chapter 3 indicated there might be more constructive ways of theorising the dyad. This not only demonstrates the space for this study but also the need for a research account that is comprehensive and detailed, in order to develop 'other ways of knowing' the dyad and family structure. In this chapter, I reflect upon how I set out to do this, and the methodological considerations involved. In the first section, I critically discuss my chosen research methods. The second section discusses the ethical considerations of the project. In the third and fourth sections, I reflexively consider my social positioning in relation to those of the participants and what impact this may have had on the research process. The final part provides an overview of the research process, including the individuals within the research sample.

4.1 Project and methodological approach

To document and theorise the lived experiences of dyads I chose biographical interviews, an exploratory, qualitative approach used to address the perspectives of participants. This enabled a deep examination of their multifaceted and shifting experiences. There is a view that qualitative investigation generates knowledge which allows research readers to "see through the eyes of the researched" (Bryman 2008:385), and into the "inner reality of humans" (Bryman 2008:367). As the sample is constituted of people of African-Caribbean heritage, this level of insight is important. There has been a failure to recognise black people as "in touch with [their] emotions", and as "vulnerable" (Lee 2013a:n.p.). Black people have been objectified in discourse (De Maynard 2007; Bost, Bruce and Manning 2019), and their interior lives have been largely ignored and thus under-explored. Gaskell explains (2000:39) that interviews can provide "a fine textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behaviours of people in particular social contexts". Interviews work well as tools for researching somewhat

controversial topics, like single-parent family structure, and that are personal, like parent-child relationships because they enable the collection of a range of detailed viewpoints (Gaskell 2000:47). This was important to this study as it I sought to examine participants' views on their identities, family lives, relationships and their neighbourhoods. This method also allowed me to check my understanding and gain clarification (Gaskell 2000:45), and avoid misinterpretation of narratives.

Qualitative interviews are not an unproblematic approach, however. One risk in this study was that of participants becoming self-conscious or defensive during the interaction, due to the stigma around the family structure as well as black families. Another risk with interviews is of participants adopting a stance they perceive to be desired by the researcher, intending to be helpful (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000:65-66). In interviews, I tried to encourage people to be forthright and probed for detail to try to understand why people held the beliefs they did. I felt it was important to do so, as there is power in marginalised subjects defining their situations, and sharing their perspectives on the social backdrop against which they live against and the various ways they respond to this environment. In doing so they can contribute towards "other ways of knowing", to the creation of counter-discourse (Mirza 1997:5), and the formulation of "oppositional consciousness" (Harding 2004:2) or "resistant knowledge projects" (Collins 2019). It is such perspectives which can generate critical and constructive knowledge for social transformation. It is perhaps for such reasons that interview methods are frequently used in sociological research with black people including parents (for instance, Reynolds 2005; Wilson 2014; Rollock *et al.* 2015; Dow 2016) and youth (Alexander 1996; Reynolds 2007; Byfield 2008; Bakkali 2019).

Qualitative approaches have generated personal testimony with the potential to disrupt longstanding narratives on polarising issues. Collins (1991:22) argues that intersectional social positioning provides individuals with a "unique angle of vision" on "self, community and society" facilitating the perception of fallacies, contradictions and double standards. This may be true of the narratives of single-parent women and men raised by them, in how the telling of their life stories may work to develop critical consciousness and constructive knowledge on the intersection of blackness and single-parent family structure.

Foucault's concept of subjugated knowledge (1980) can be used to explain how in England, as well as other parts of the world, black people's knowledges have been viewed as "naive knowledges" and therefore "disqualified" from the mainstream (Foucault 1980:81-83). This has worked to limit the understanding of black lives in societies and among communities and individuals themselves. Personal testimonies, known by some perspectives as counter-stories, articulate the experiences of people from groups whose knowledge and viewpoints are typically suppressed (Solórzano and Yosso 2001, 2002; Delgado and Stefancic 2012:202). Intersectional asymmetries of power generated by race, gender, class, family structure and age can explain why single black mothers and their children have not had the authority or privilege to speak back to discourses about them and to institute their collective counter-stories.

For Delgado and Stefancic (2012:48-49) "experiential knowledge" is important for perspective-building, thus methods such as "storytelling", "parables", "family histories," and "biographies," are all valuable because, when mobilised, they can disrupt discourses which dehumanise and perpetuate harmful or negative preconceptions. Daniel Soloranzo and Tara Yosso (2001) explain some of the strengths of counter stories:

[Counter-stories] can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's centre by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems ... they can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position. (Solórzano and Yosso 2001:475)

In the same way, this scholarship views the personal accounts of black single-parent women and men raised by them as potentially powerful for social knowledge and understanding because of their potentiality to destabilise longstanding stigma (Goffman 1963; Tyler and Slater 2018). This would be achieved through either fully contextualising or countering dominant claims about the dyad and single-mother family structure. Counter-stories can also function as affirming, non-distorting mirrors for individuals in similar situations. This is important for those positioned within categories of social difference. Alternative interpretations of single-mother family structure do exist. The importance of cultural variation in family organisation and gender roles is increasingly recognised in analysis of black families (Chambers and Gracia 2022:60-63), with single-mother family structure viewed by some as a "normative Caribbean family structure" and "well-established cultural practice" (Reynolds 2010:18).

Turning to focus on how participant's narratives developed, I do acknowledge that participants' accounts were not 'purely' received one-directionally, but co-constituted, through the interaction between myself and individual research participants (Gaskell 2000:45). Another interviewer would have produced different accounts, due to the unique "sharing and negotiation of realities" (Gaskell 2000:45). It is suggested participants' accounts are to some degree self-consciously constructed and people draw common forms of life narratives to develop their personal stories (Bruner 2004). Bruner suggests (2004:708) suggests canonical narratives are "recipes for structuring experience". In interviews, during analysis and when writing up I tried to remain attuned to how such pervasive narratives may have been subtly shaping people's accounts. The interview method is not without weaknesses, but I believe it was the most appropriate to work with in this project.

4.2 Ethics

Studying the lived experiences of black single-parent family members is a sensitive topic, both personally and socially (Dickson-Swift, James and Liamputtong 2008:1; Gunaratnam 2003:159-163; Lee 1993). Firstly, it was personally sensitive as I was asking about experiences of parenting, childhood and family relationships. The interviews required deep reflection on emotive topics. Mothers were asked to recall how they became a single parent and how that felt, and to reflect on their parenting and sons' development over time. Interviews with adult sons included their reflections on parent-child relationships and discussion of their emotions around these.

Such topics can cause participants to be guarded as they can be viewed as what Yasmin Gunaratnam describes as "threatening topics" (Gunaratnam 2003:159-160). Engaging with these topics can make interviews a stressful experience for participants, an ethical issue (BSA 2017:5) of which I was mindful. These parts of the interviews were undoubtedly intrusive and at times emotionally stirring for interviewees. Lee and Renzetti's description of personally sensitive research includes the type of work "that intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal experience [...] where it deals with things sacred to those being studied which they do not wish profaned" (Lee and Renzetti 2010:512). They suggest (2010:511) that sensitive research holds a potentially "psychic cost" for participants such as "guilt, shame or embarrassment". For Brannen, participants in such research encounters may find "confronting and telling their stories a stressful experience" (Brannen 1988, quoted in Gunaratnam 2003:159). Gunaratnam (2003:159-165) explains how people's varying responses to "topic threat" impact

the interaction between the researcher and researched, shaping what people tell and what they do not, which in turn shapes the resultant, co-constituted account. I did recognise the delicacy of exploring these issues with people and tried to be aware of these underlying issues and to be alert to any signs of discomfort during research interactions. There was no way of knowing how my questions might affect research participants, and if the research were to be carried out, there was no way of negating its delicate nature. Potential participants were given prior notice of the topical coverage of interviews in the project information sheet (see appendix), facilitating their informed consent (BSA 2017:5). The written information offered the opportunity to reflect and to mentally prepare in advance of the meeting, perhaps deciding what and how much they were happy to share with me.

The research can be described as socially sensitive due to distorted intersectional social constructions of the dyad and the family structure and the risk of inadvertently reinforcing and perpetuating stereotypes and subjugation which result from these (see Lee and Renzetti 1990:510). The social sensitivity placed me, as a researcher handling people's accounts, in a position of special responsibility. This research attempts to speak 'on behalf of' people who are normally silenced, ignored, marginalised or disrespected. But as Sieber and Stanley rightly argue:

Sensitive research addresses some of society's most pressing social issues and policy questions. Although ignoring the ethical issues in sensitive research is not a responsible approach to science, shying away from controversial topics, simply because they are controversial, is also an avoidance of responsibility.

(Sieber and Stanley 1988:55, quoted in Lee and Renzetti 1990:526)

During the collection of data and the analysis stage as well as writing up, I was very attentive to the image of single black mothers and young black men taking shape in my account. This raised the question of whether my written account of the research should omit anything emerging out of the data which research readers might find unpalatable. The sociologist Gill Crozier has previously weighed up this matter asking important questions in this vein: "what data should be shared and what should not?", "should a researcher sanitise their account to protect their participants?", and "should the researcher 'tell it how it is' and 'should the researcher present what she sees/hears in a way that she thinks will 'protect' the respondent or be acceptable [...] to the audience?" (Crozier 2000:82). Crozier decided that what was important was to "employ

measures to minimise the negative and unintended consequences of the research" (Crozier 2000:82). Arguably, researchers have a duty not to betray their participants, which includes protecting them through responsible representation (Finch 1993:174, 177). As some researchers suggest, reinforcing existing negative images would mean possibly further stigmatising the categories of difference represented (Mason 2002:42; Dickson-Swift, James and Liamputtong 2008:5) and undermining their interests (Finch 1993:177). Finch's argument (1993:175-176) that women sociologists have a 'special responsibility' to women also applies to a black sociologist studying black people. In the broader social context, collective interests are at stake (Dickson-Swift, James and Liamputtong 2008:2) due to the possible impacts of misrepresentation and distortion.

I was conscious that the research participants' agreement to take part in my research project was a leap of faith. While consent was given to be interviewed, it was ultimately not feasible to gain consent on how people's words were eventually used in the research account, the overall interpretation and the conclusions built using them. One way I had originally hoped to manage and decrease any sense of related discomfort for participants was to try to make the research a collaborative process. In the black feminist-womanist paradigm outlined by Lindsay-Dennis (2015) researchers are encouraged to create a community with research participants, and to collaborate with them in the analysis of data. This "will not only increase content validity but also demonstrate an ethic of caring" (Lindsay-Dennis 2015:515) and demonstrates an "ethic of personal accountability" of the researcher (Lindsay-Dennis 2015:510). Lindsay-Dennis describes the potentiality of such approaches:

Research designs that facilitate dialogue, accompanied by consideration of ideas/theories generated throughout this process, may enhance participants' ability to speak for themselves, name their own experiences, and make decisions about their lives. Dialoguing and sharing stories in the research context provide opportunities for healing, because it may enable some [black participants] to share experiences, knowledge, and/or exchange wisdom that is often devalued in other settings. (Lindsay-Dennis 2015:514)

I originally planned to do this through a "respondent validation" stage in the research process (see Bloor 1978), also called "member checking" elsewhere (Robson 2011:158). This process involves debriefing participants with an overview of the project findings, outlining how data was

interpreted and treating their responses as additional data (Bloor 1978:549-551). I also originally intended to create focus groups made up of the research participants, but this was one way in which the research did not go to plan. Due to time constraints during the research process, providing details of the study's findings to participants had to be deferred until after writing up. This was regrettable as first and foremost it was a commitment made to participants, and secondly because having this further dialogue with participants may have further strengthened the analysis and the study overall.

4.3 Positionality and reflexivity

As a black single mother of a son, I have a personal connection to the study. Scholars have long reflected on the implications of connections to research through biography (see Ladner 1973; Collins 1991:xi-xv; Finch 1993; Reay 1996, 2017:1-7). Reflexivity is important for the integrity of the study, specifically in attempting to be self-aware of how one's commitments and emotional investments may have influenced the research process, from sampling to analysis, and to writing up. I recognise that it may not have been possible to completely self-detect my own biases. There is the notion that all research is to some degree partial (Finch 1993:172). I view my connection to my project as an asset. It fuelled my passion for and commitment to study, motivating me to try 'new ways of seeing' my subject and to ask new questions of it to develop critical and constructive knowledge. Lindsay-Dennis suggests that "active engagement" and "passion" are important, and that to be "moved" by your research is not inappropriate (Lindsay-Dennis 2015:512). For African-American scholar Lindsay-Dennis, research can be "both an intellectual and spiritual pursuit of purpose" whereby one's personal history can provide the impetus for attempts to effect social change (Lindsay-Dennis 2015:512). In such cases, the researcher is also "forced to explore the meaning of one's lived experience and research training" (Lindsay-Dennis 2015:512).

This was illustrated in the internal conflict experienced by African-American sociologist Joyce Ladner (1973:415-416) who described experiencing a sense of dilemma when studying young, inner-city African American women. Ladner recognised a conflict between her social science training, which had conditioned her to view her research sample from a deviant perspective, and her experiential knowledge, which afforded her a perspective that was "culturally sensitive" and "invalidated" the deviant perspective (Ladner 1973:415-416). She resolved that her 'other ways of knowing' were a strength rather than a liability to be hidden, and asserts that value-free

sociology and pure objectivity are more myth than reality (Ladner 1973:421), an argument supported by others (Oakley 1981; Collins 1991).

Ladner (1973) points out that the values of scholars are self-evident in what they choose to study as well as in their preference for particular concepts. She argues that a “dispassionate” rather than “ameliorative” stance in social research is itself problematic (Ladner 1973:421). Ladner recalled how she resolved the tension between her two perspectives and the tradition of objectivity:

I decided whose side I was on and resolved within myself that as a black social scientist I must take a stand and there could be no value-free sanctuary for me.

(Ladner 1973:421)

Similarly, white British sociologist Reay (2017:2, 6) has critically reflected upon working with a “passionate partiality”. Reay writes:

My working-class background influences everything I research and write. That passionate partiality is helpful in ensuring a strong focus on social justice and empathic focus.

(Reay 2017: 2, 6)

Reay further explained that her personal experience “sharpen[s]” her analysis and characterises her work as “a patchwork that owes as much to intuition and feeling as to scholarly rigour” (Reay 2017:6).

Scholars' uncompromising positions on partiality are instructive for me. I was aware that while holding certain commitments and investments, it was crucial to be open to what emerged in the research field and to validate findings through previous empirical research and theory. I chose to reject the sceptical tone and 'problem-focused' approach favoured by some sociologists; this would not fit the ethos of my scholarship and the aim of my study, which is to develop critical and constructive knowledge about an under- and misrepresented topic, the single mother-son dyad and single-mother family structure.

4.4 Insider/outsider status

As stated, there was some commonality between the research participants and myself – I am a single black mother of a son and, like my participants, a Londoner too. Does this mean I was an insider or an outsider among participants? And what, if anything, did these similar aspects of experience and identity mean for the project and the research process? In this section, I engage with methodological literature that explores researcher positionality, the nature of interview interactions and the dynamics of power in the research encounter. I also examine writing by minoritised researchers on their experiences of working with people in shared categories of difference.

In the literature the complex notion of ‘commonality’ between the researcher and the researched mostly focuses on ‘race’ (Rhodes 1994; Twine 2000; Gunaratnam 2003) and gender (Oakley 1981; Finch 1993; Phoenix 1994a). Aspects of shared positioning between research participants and myself were multi-categorical, including not just race or gender, but also family structure and geography (place residence in inner city London). There is disagreement about whether any such commonality is fixed and stable (see Gunaratnam 2003:97-104 for a critical discussion of the literature) and about the nature of its effect on research interviews.

Some minoritised interviewers suggest minoritised interviewees identify with them more due to a (perceived) familiarity with one another’s cultural references, traditions, and worldview. Collins suggests (1986:S26) that insiders share “similar experiences”, “a common history” and “taken-for-granted knowledge”. For individuals racialised as ‘black’ and ‘brown’ in societies organised by ‘race’, personal experiences of racism can create a sense of a “shared reality” (Bhopal 2001:284). For example, as a researcher of African origin working with participants of African origin in Britain, Bertha Ochieng (2010:1729) felt the participants in her study viewed her as someone who understood their “struggles and history”. Nonetheless, a sense of a similar historical and cultural background cannot be equated with commonality; these things are mere aspects of individuals’ complex identities. It is understandable that identification with the researcher may help research participants feel more comfortable during the research interview. However, the degrees of effect, if any, that this may have on the data generated is unknown. Gunaratnam highlights how belief in the benefit of ‘race matching’ in interviews is bound up in race essentialism, “based upon ideas of racial identities as being primary, ‘pure’, mono-cultural” (Gunaratnam 2003:80). In the same way, mothers and young men from single-parent, black

inner-city households are a heterogeneous group of individuals. Therefore, I did not expect any mutual identification or connectivity. While there were commonalities between us and among the sample, there were also many differences.

Some scholars argue that the focus on skin colour in the research encounter is disproportionate; the notion that 'race' matching interviewer and interviewee will equal a better interview is too simplistic (Phoenix 1994a:49; Gunaratnam 2003:76-77). For Rhodes, this "overlooks intragroup differences and conflict" (Rhodes 1994:556). Gunaratnam suggests this notion "gives the impression that a complex combination and manifestation of effects can be pinned down to singular and overarching demographic differences in 'race' and ethnicity" (Gunaratnam 2003:76-77). Skin colour is but one of many social signifiers (Rhodes 1994:552, 556; Twine 2000:9; Gunaratnam 2003:71, 80,100). Categories of difference include gender, class, sexuality, disability, and citizenship status; this means it is difficult to know precisely which facet of identity might be a source of connection or distancing. The dynamic between the researcher and the researched is shaped by "complex interaction between social categories" (Hamilton 2020:522), as opposed to a single social attribute. As Phoenix suggests:

[T]he simultaneity of 'race,' social class, gender, (assumed) sexuality and age make it extremely difficult to tease apart the aspects of the interviewer which are having an impact on the power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee.

(Phoenix 1994:56)

For example, some differences that existed between participants and myself included mothers' seniority and life experience as well as sons' gender identity.

There is also discussion on whether aspects of a researcher's identity can facilitate access to potential participants in particular categories or communities, based on the idea that individuals are more likely to participate when they identify with the researcher. There are various discussions on access and researcher identity which are important, but here I focus on the discussion on shared social positioning and access. In the field, researchers' experiences of this dynamic have varied: some researchers have found that shared ethnic heritage or shared minoritised status influenced participation positively (Bhopal 2001; Egharevba 2001:238; Ochieng 2010:1726). In the literature, some researchers observed that participants not only

appeared to be more willing to speak to researchers from backgrounds like theirs but also felt able to be less guarded in those discussions, apparently because they felt less vulnerable. However, other researchers (Phoenix 1994a:53; Reynolds 2005:6-7; Hamilton 2020:523-525) discuss how their role as academic researchers complicated access in different ways, at times rendering them outsiders. This is because similarities in social positioning may not override concerns about the hidden workings of institutions collecting information on subjugated people (see Phoenix 1994a:53, Reynolds 2005:7), nor scepticism about the difference that academic studies can make to social inequalities and injustice (Phoenix 1994a:53). Some black women researchers' various experiences of trying to gain access to participants are documented in the literature. For example, Hamilton (2020:523-525) was vetted by potential black women participants before they agreed to participate in her research. Not dissimilarly, Reynolds (2005:7) found interview requests made to elder black women in her qualitative study on Caribbean motherhood, were met with unease, and her identity as a fellow black woman did not negate concerns. She had to be vouched for by trusted members of communities before her interview requests were considered.

Working within the academy is another part of researchers' multifaceted identity. Researchers' class and culture may disrupt notions of commonality and 'race matching'. Reflecting on her empirical study with fellow South Asian women students, Bhopal (2010:191) discusses how her professional status as an academic gave her access to a classed space that her participants did not feel a part of. Like Hamilton, I found most potential participants wanted to check my approach to the topic before they agreed to take part, due to the negative or distorted narratives on single-parent black families in public discourse. Such research experiences show that the effect of shared aspects of social positioning – in this study, 'race', gender, family structure, and geography – on access are not predictable. Access is more often negotiated than given.

Another perceived benefit of being an 'insider-researcher', as well as mutual identification as a result of 'commonality' and access to participants in particular categories or 'communities', is a 'natural' affinity with participants. This is said to generate 'better data'. In the literature, there is no consensus on this among scholars. As an African-American woman scholar doing research with African-heritage Brazilians, Twine found that her assumption that she would have a shared political affinity, including "shared critiques of anti-black racism" was misplaced. Twine's research participants valorised whiteness and articulated views indicating internalised racism (2000:2). In

addition to this, Twine described interview interactions as being conditioned by complex hierarchies of race and colourism (2000:5). She suggests (2000:19), both researchers and participants make judgements about and place each other using dominant criteria and assumptions, which has implications for the resulting data. Drawing on this experience, Twine argues that assumptions of shared affinity are erroneous:

...the utility of racial matching is contingent on the subordinate person having acquired a particular subjectivity. It is premised on racial subalterns considering their skin folk their kin folk and being more distrustful of members of the racially dominant group.
(Twine 2000:16)

Twine's experience demonstrates that political commitments, sympathies, or stances, cannot be predicted based on individuals' identities and social positioning. This is one dynamic that challenges notions of 'natural' affinity in interview encounters.

In the literature, it is acknowledged that black and brown researchers working with those from similar backgrounds might have shared experiences and cultural references relevant to the research topic and that being able to discuss these constructively can bring added value to the study. Scholars comment that mutual identification can facilitate rapport, trust, and productive interviews (Oakley 1981; Finch 1993:172; Bhopal 2001, 2010:193; Ochieng 2010:1729-1730). Patricia Hill Collins asserts that shared aspects of social positioning, for example, living life racialised as black, can produce "commonalities of outlook" (Collins 1991:518, 529). In her work with black families, African-British academic Ochieng (2010:1730) describes how families not only felt "familiar" to her but also that participants viewed her as "one of them", a dynamic which she claims had a positive effect on her data (Ochieng 2010:1730).

I found that participants were curious about my experience of single-parenting a son. Before, during and after interviews I was asked about my experiences. I answered these questions, and in turn, was offered insights and advice by both mother and son participants. This is briefly discussed further later in the chapter. While such discussions may have put participants at ease, it cannot be assumed that this encouraged them to share more in interviews. Like myself, Ochieng (2010:1728) also took the decision to share her own experience, believing this would help to "balance" the researcher-researched relationship.

Some researchers caution against the idea that reciprocity between the interviewer and interviewees can redress the unequal exchange in the research relationship (Gunaratnam 2003:83-85; Bhopal 2010:192). Gunaratnam (2003) critiques the use of self-disclosure, suggesting that it is used to ingratiate and that such dynamics are “underwritten by the dominance of the power of the interviewer as researcher” (Gunaratnam 2003:83-85). From this perspective, comfortable and enjoyable interview encounters cannot negate imbalances of power in the researcher/researched relationship – a subject to which I now turn.

Determining the degree to which a researcher is an insider must include consideration of balances of power in the research process. There is a widely held view that researchers ultimately hold the most power and participants hold much less in comparison. For Bhopal (2010:193), this is because investigators legitimately invade privacy, hold control in the process of knowledge production, and have the authority to interpret data in the ways they choose. This is something I have often reflected upon over the course of this project — how I, as a researcher, hold the authority to represent participants' stories in the way I choose and the generosity of their trust in this. Being in the position to listen to a variety of people's life stories and to learn from them – personally as well as professionally – is also a privilege (Ergharevba 2001). It is also fundamentally unequal because research participants receive little in return (Bhopal 2010:193). It is for such reasons that Ochieng (2010:1728) argues against equating similarity - in culture, background, and experience – with equality in the research relationship. However, there is also the perspective that power is not unilateral; participants can leave the study, refuse to cooperate, and can withhold information (Rhodes 1994:549, 556; Reynolds 2005:94; Bhopal 2010:193). There is a perspective that a ‘who-has-more?’, asymmetrical understanding of power distribution in research relationships is reductive (Merriam *et al.* 2001; Reynolds 2005:193-194; Bhopal 2010:193; Hamilton 2010). As Bhopal writes:

Often power relations are more complicated... power is not a simple have/have not aspect of a relationship and thus objective experience of power is often ambivalent for both researcher and the respondent. Power relations are based on a continuum and can never be fully equalised in the research process. (Bhopal 2010:193)

Researchers suggest that power between the researcher and the researched is multi-dimensional and multi-directional; various factors such as "gender", "educational background", and "seniority"

as well as the interview setting have varying effects (Merriam *et al.* 2001: 411). Power dynamics between researcher and participants are "shifting" (Hamilton 2020:520, 522) "fluid", and "constantly changing" (Bhopal 2010:194). Reynolds comments: "our status, our difference and our similarity is fluid and constantly changing both within a single interview as well as during the research process itself" (Reynolds 2005:194). What is described by Reynolds is demonstrated in Ochieng's description (2010:1728) of the dynamism of her identity over the course of interviews, with different aspects coming to the fore, depending on the point of discussion; her identity shifted between the professional and personal, from researcher to woman, and to mother, with varying vulnerability and privilege.

As the literature demonstrates, the position of insider/outsider is not stable. It is clear that shared experiences, particularly of racism, which are distinctive yet contested, may be important for participants' comfort during interviews; yet it is impossible to quantify the overall impact this has on the shifting dynamics of interviews. Notions of shared attitudes and politics are based on assumption, as argued by Twine (2000:2-3, 5, 19), and race essentialism, as identified by Gunaratnam (2003:76-77), may be unfounded as there is heterogeneity among people within shared categories of difference.

4.5 The research process

In this section, I provide details of the practicalities of the study, specifically, how the research sample was developed and the composition of the group, a description of the data collection process, as well as how analysis of the data was done.

Recruitment

The sample was made up of 21 research participants. Of these, ten came through word of mouth and referral; this was sometimes part of a snowball process, meaning that some research participants kindly introduced me and the project to their son, mother, neighbour or friend. Six people joined the research project through its promotion on social media, namely on Facebook. Three sons came to the project through a referral by an organisation, The Amos Bursary, which is an educational charity that supports black students. One research participant got in contact after seeing the recruitment poster on a noticeboard at the Black Cultural Archives.

The use of social media for recruitment provided some useful insight into responses to the research project. Members of the public commenting on the recruitment posts said revealing and significant things. One man questioned, “can I just ask why only mothers, not dads?” Someone astutely commented, “how long can we ignore structural factors that contribute to the experience?” One woman said the project was potentially worthwhile, as long as it “did not encourage” single mothering. One self-identified single mother expressed the reasons for her reluctance to participate: “the [single mother] 'label' has negative connotations which many women do not want to be associated with!”

An information sheet was sent to prospective research participants for their informed consent and people were encouraged to contact me with any questions.

The recruitment criteria were:

- a) Research participants identify or be racialised as ‘black’
- b) Mothers had raised at least one son to the age of 18 years
- c) Sons were aged at least 18 years
- d) Participant’s family had (ideally) resided within an inner London borough during the childhood of sons
- e) The experience of single-mother family structure was for a significant amount of time, for example, five or more years.

The sample was self-selecting and not representative in terms of social class. The generalisability of the research findings was not a concern as it would not have been possible to achieve for such a small-scale study. As mentioned, the main objective was to develop valuable insight for the purpose of building constructive knowledge.

Table 1. List of participant mothers

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Heritage	Number of children	London borough of residence	Highest educational qualification	Occupation
Alice	46	Barbadian	2	Haringey	Degree	Mentor and counsellor
Ann	51	Indo-Caribbean and Welsh	1	Brent	Degree	Trade union officer
Audrey	47	Jamaican	5	Lewisham	Masters degree	Lecturer and business owner
Jazzy	46	Jamaican	1	Lewisham	Degree	Phlebotomist
JJ	50	Jamaican	2	Haringey	Degree	Social worker
Juliet	50	Jamaican	2	Merton	Master's degree	Teacher
Margaret	51	Jamaican	1	Waltham Forest	Masters degree	Executive coach
Maya	61	Grenadian	3	Lambeth	Diploma	Unemployed
Natalie	35	Montserratian and Irish	2	Hackney, Haringey and Waltham Forest	Masters degree	Teacher
Sparrow	54	Jamaican	3	Haringey	Degree	Social worker
Teresa	60	Grenadian	1	Tower Hamlets	O levels	Civil servant

Table 2. List of participant sons

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Heritage	London borough/s raised in	Occupation
Aaron	25	Jamaican and English	Hackney	Rugby coach
Barry	20	Jamaican	Hackney	Undergraduate student
Harlem-King	19	Montserratian, Irish and Jamaican	Hackney, Haringey and Waltham Forest	Theatre producer
Jay	28	Jamaican	Waltham Forest	DJ and solicitor
Jeremiah	22	Jamaican	Newham	Undergraduate student
Lenny	20	Barbadian and Jamaican	Haringey	Waiter
Michael	39	Grenadian	Tower Hamlets	PhD student
Santiago	20	Jamaican	Haringey	Undergraduate student
Samson	21	Dominican, Antiguan and Jamaican	Hackney, Haringey and Waltham Forest	Undergraduate student
Vince	22	Jamaican	Brent	Undergraduate student

The sample

I provide short descriptions of the lives of each of the 21 participants and their circumstances at the time of interview to supplement the information detailed in the tables. These profiles are given space here in the thesis because collectively they raise questions about the intersectional social constructions which encompass negative tropes about blackness, single-mother family structure, male youth and womanhood. Pseudonyms were used to anonymise participants, which were chosen mostly by themselves, for the ethical principle of confidentiality and anonymity (BSA 2017:5).

Aaron, 25, was living between his parents' homes for the convenience of commuting to work in different locations. Raised by his mother, Aaron later moved in with his father. Aaron had recently become a father for the first time. No longer in a relationship with the child's mother, he was planning to be an involved father.

Alice, 46, and a mother of two, returned to university as a parent and qualified as a counsellor. Her mother had been a hugely supportive role and the children were taking turns living with their grandmother due to an insufficient number of bedrooms. Alice described a very amicable relationship with her former partner, who remained connected to their children and even holidayed with the family on occasion.

Ann, 51, and a mother of one, did not have relatives in the city but described a community of long-standing colleagues and activist friends among whom her son was raised. The father of Ann's son was involved in caring for him over the years.

Audrey, 47, was a mother of five children - three daughters and two sons – from two marriages. Audrey had studied for her degrees as a student parent with small children. Her first marriage was abusive, which she fled. Audrey had received less support than other women in the study as her mother had returned to the Caribbean and she lacked relatives in London.

Barry, 20, had never met his father or any of his mother's relatives but described the church as providing his family unit with a community. His mother was a foster carer until adopting a baby boy. An undergraduate student, Barry was living on campus and organising an internship in New York for the coming summer.

Harlem-King, 19, was working as an arts producer. Harlem-King spoke of spending lots of time with his grandparents and great-grandparents over the years and maintaining his close relationships with them. Harlem-King had not known his father.

Jay, 28, maintained contact with his father following his parent's separation but described him as not very engaged. He had recently left a position at a law firm to work full-time on his DJ and events management business and was living in a property owned by his mother.

Jazzy, 46, studied for a degree as a student parent and established a career within the NHS. Later, she was permanently signed off work due after contracting a long-term health condition. She described facing some very challenging times with her son, due to issues with his health and behaviour, but they were maintaining a close relationship in his adulthood. Jazzy was enjoying being a grandmother and watching her son be a parent.

Jeremiah, 22, was studying abroad as an undergraduate at a prestigious American university. Jeremiah described his mother's tenacity during his challenging trajectory through the schooling system. He had lost contact with his father at age 12.

JJ, 50, and a mother of two, enjoyed a large and supportive family network, which included the father of her children. JJ held two bachelor's degrees, studying for the second when her two children were small and she balanced night work with caring and studying. JJ was working as a social worker locally with children and young people.

Juliet, 50, raised her two children in a relatively suburban part of London. She returned to higher education while her youngest child was an infant and went on to qualify and work as a teacher. Juliet spoke of enjoying the support of close friends and family over the years.

Lenny, 20, was doing part-time work during a year out of education. Lenny saw his father frequently and spoke of them having worked through some difficulties. He had enjoyed close relationships with his maternal grandmother and uncles throughout his childhood.

Margaret, 51, a mother of one and originally from a different British city, had a relatively smaller family network in London. Margaret studied at night school while her son was young and worked her way up to management in a civil service department. Following redundancy, she studied for a master's and built a business.

Maya, 61, and a mother of three, was a voluntary worker. The father of her son, her eldest, had disengaged during his early years. Her son was cared for by her parents until he was age 10. She described her son as a dedicated father and stepfather.

Michael, 39, studied for a master's before moving to Scotland and spending ten years working in banking. He described his relationship with his father as intermittent during childhood and distant in adulthood. Since returning to London, Michael had been living with his mother and her long-term partner due to the cost of London accommodation while studying for a PhD.

Natalie, 35, continued her education after becoming a parent at 16, and went on to qualify and work as a teacher. Throughout this time, she was supported by her parents and grandparents. She had moved with her husband and young daughter to a Middle Eastern country for work temporarily, to improve the family's prospects in England.

Samson, 21, a recent graduate, described growing up in an intergenerational home with his grandmother, mother, aunt, and two siblings. He had maintained contact with his father but described him as having been unreliable.

Santiago, 20, was an undergraduate university student who had not known his father while growing up. Santiago had left the family home, due to a lack of bedroom space and relationship difficulties with his mother. Over the course of the research, Santiago moved from student accommodation to renting a room from a relative.

Sparrow, 54, was a mother of two. Sparrow used redundancy as an opportunity to study while raising her children and qualified as a social worker. She worked long hours and travelled long distances in the role and suffered burnout. The time Sparrow took off work negatively affected the status of her professional registration. Since returning to work Sparrow had been working in social work-related roles.

Theresa, 60, enjoyed lots of childcare from her siblings and mother, having been raised in a large family and been the first of her siblings to become a parent. Theresa worked as a civil servant and spent 8 years as a local councillor to get the views of residents heard.

Vince, 22, was an undergraduate student. Vince described having trouble adjusting to life in England, having joined his mother here from Jamaica at age six. He was studying medicine and planning to return to Jamaica to practice there.

The sample was mostly second- and third-generation British and of black, African-Caribbean heritage. Throughout the thesis I use two terms; 'black' as shorthand and 'African-Caribbean' when appropriate, to give a clear sense of ethnic, cultural and geographic origins.

Of the sample, mothers were aged between 61 and 35 years of age, and sons were aged between 19 and 39. The ages of participant sons meant the study gained some insight into the realities and perspectives of black, African-Caribbean-British male millennials. Given the inter-generational nature of the research, continuities and differences in attitudes and experiences were also captured. Nine of the 11 mothers were of black African-Caribbean heritage. Two mothers were of mixed heritage (Indo-Caribbean and Welsh, and African-Caribbean and Irish); both mothers had raised sons racialised as black. In the sample of sons, nine were Black African-Caribbean British, and one was of mixed heritage (African-Caribbean and British) and was raised by a black mother. As Table 1 shows, nine of the 11 mothers in the sample held degrees and of these women, five had postgraduate qualifications. Among sons, eight out of ten were either studying for a degree at the time of interview or already held one. Most of the mothers I spoke to held professional roles as social workers, business owners and teachers. As is shown in Table 2, sons predominantly were students in higher education or working in a vocation. These characteristics of the sample made the study unique as previous research has predominantly focused on low-income single black mother families. It allowed the study to explore if and how these mothers' and sons' intersectional positioning at family structure, race and class shaped their social experiences. To be clear, in describing participants' education and careers, I am not implying their relative respectability (Skeggs 1997:1-4; Gay 2014:257-260). For me, what this glimpse of individuals' circumstances indicates is the distance of the people from dominant stereotypical and pathologising representations of the dyad and family structure.

The interviews

Biographical interviews (Rosenthal 2004) were used to explore how participants told of their lives and experiences. This interview approach considers phases in people's lives, for instance in sons' interviews, their time at school, their childhood and adolescence to contextualise them in their backgrounds (Rosenthal 2004:49, 52). This style of interview facilitates mapping people's lives in order to grasp how individuals respond to their circumstances. For example, it has been used in research with young adults involved in 'road life' (Bakkali 2019). A similar method, oral history, has been used in research with Black British women (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]; Rassool 1997). Keeping the interview sample size relatively small (21 people)

allowed sufficient time for interviewing each person, and some participants a second time, as well as for full transcription of each discussion and analysis and interpretation. A total of 31 interviews were carried out, as ten research participants were interviewed twice. Interviews were carried out between September 2017 and June 2018. They took place in people's homes, in a university room or in a quiet café. The shortest interview was 47 minutes (this particular research participant had limited time to spare) and the longest was 2 hours and 59 minutes. The average interview length, calculated using the mean, was 2 hours and 2 minutes. In biographical interviews topic guides rather than pre-scripted questions are used to support the flow of interviews (Rosenthal 2004). Rosenthal (2004:52-53) has outlined how any questions in this type of interview can fall into two main categories: those focused on phases in people's lives, or questions dealing with a single life theme. Some of the life-phase asked as prompts were, to mothers: *tell me about raising your son*, and to sons: *what it was like growing up in this neighbourhood?* And to all: *how has your relationship with your son or mother been over the years?* 'Single themes' included sons' experiences of schooling, family housing, and the involvement of separated fathers.

My questions were kept to a minimum, and were determined by taking cues from what interviewees had to say (Mason 2002:64). This helped the conversation remain relevant to the individuals, allowed participants to shape the research agenda and to narrate their own realities (Dickson-Swift, James and Liamputtong 2008:7). Interviews were initially more exploratory in style and I identified possible key themes as the data collection progressed. Later, interviews were more focused; with participants being interviewed a second time, I built upon what emerged from the first discussion and asked questions stemming from themes developing in the data. Two interviews were done using social media applications (Niero 2014). My second interview with Natalie, 35, was done by video call (see Jangorban, Roudsari and Taghipou 2014) as she had returned to Jordan, where she was working, by this time. This was convenient and provided a small insight into Natalie's domestic life. Another interview was done using direct messaging, due to timing constraints, with Ann, 51. This interview lasted over a few days, producing a rich and interesting transcript. However, there were signs that interviewing by text message was not ideal for research on a subject personal to participants. Ann mentioned feeling "anxious" about sharing such private information and I wondered if conversation in person would have somehow reassured her. I was concerned about how Ann was feeling about the nature of the questions asked and did not have any non-verbal cues to try to gauge this. For me, this experience demonstrated that direct message interviewing for research personal topics might be unworkable.

Most participants appeared quite engaged and interested in the research focus. They often asked me about my motivations for studying the topic and about what findings were emerging. Juliet, 50, one of the participant mothers, thought the research could have an important purpose:

I just really hope the research shows that even though we have the media telling us about our boys – they are great, they really are. And there are many mothers out there that are doing a great job, and there are many young men that have grown up to be great young men because of their mothers ... So, I think that's important to relay. *Juliet*

Some people mentioned finding an opportunity to reflect was rewarding. JJ, one of the mothers, remarked "you don't really talk about your journey through parenthood or anything like that normally". However, while speaking on sensitive topics can offer catharsis (Lee and Renzetti 1990:524; Dickson-Swift, James and Liamputtong 2008:6, 11), the chance to speak at length and to be heard by a respectful and interested listener (Back 2007:105), Lee (1993) cautions against mischaracterising the interview as a benefit to the participant, reminding researchers that they stand to benefit more from the process than participants.

While I did tend to connect with research participants and establish rapport (Oakley 1981; Finch 1993:172; Collins 1991:518, 52; Bhopal 2001, 2010:193; Ochieng 2010:1729-1730) there were also incidences of "topic threat" (Gunaratnam 2003:159-165). These were subjects that either hung in the air or arose during interviews and created uncomfortable manoeuvrings in the interaction. For instance, I avoided asking mothers about any receipt of state benefits, and I also avoided asking sons about getting into trouble, as I did not want them to feel stereotyped and risk offence or defensiveness. The topic of benefits rarely featured in my questioning of mothers, though some women referred to it. Similarly, the topic of getting into trouble was only brought into interviews by sons when relevant.

Was it wrong to shirk from controversial subject matters? While it may have mattered for context, it was not the type of information I was interested in for the development of critical and constructive knowledge. Moreover, researchers working with marginalised, misrepresented groups must arguably question participants responsibly and imaginatively. It is quite likely that it does not matter what researchers ask, as participants will tell what they want to be known and only that. One of the participants' sons, Vince, 22, stated something along these lines at the end of his interview:

“what I gave you were the answers I wanted to give,” he said, “as in they were all truthful and authentic, but ... I gave you 95%, not 100%”.

One threatening (Gunaratnam 2003:165), or sensitive topic, for some sons was the dating lives of their mothers while raising them. I raised the subject with sons whose mothers were not a part of the project. Generally, I would ask if their mothers had established a new relationship while raising them. Sons tended to refuse to reflect upon this topic, in that they did not seem to want to discuss the topic. The question often received a curt “no”, and it did not feel appropriate to probe further. There was also unease in asking mothers, who were typically in a different generation to me, about this, due to generational hierarchies and notions of respect among African-Caribbean populations. Tracey Reynolds experienced a similar situation in her work with African-Caribbean heritage mothers in England:

Often, I felt intimidated when interviewing some of the older mothers because of the wide age difference and the fact that these mothers possess a wealth of experience. My own cultural background also meant that I was raised to respect my elders and not question them on matters that would prove to be embarrassing or intrusive for fear of appearing disrespectful. As a consequence, I felt reluctant in posing questions to these mothers that I had no problem asking the young black women, such as the discussion on areas that centred on constructions of black female sexuality and sexual identity.

(Reynolds 2005:9)

I drew on Crozier’s guidance (2000:89) in trying to use people’s tone and non-verbal cues to get a sense of what people felt comfortable with, all the while remembering the fact that the main topic of research was somewhat intrusive.

Conversations between myself and the participants usually continued after the interview officially ended. Bryman (2008) notes how some of the most valuable insight emerges once the audio recorder is switched off (and, I would add, before it is even switched on!). Initially, when relevant discussion developed after interviews, I would ask to take notes, but when I noticed the pattern, I began asking participants if they were happy for the recording to continue, just in case. As mentioned in the spaces around interviews participants often enquired about my son, one element of reciprocity (Oakley 1981; Back 2007:98) in the interaction. For Lindsay-Dennis

(2015:515) sharing personal experience is part of "active engagement in the research process". At the end of one interview when the audio recorder was still switched on, Samson, 21, asked me a thoughtful and challenging question, after I confirmed I was a single mother:

Samson: If your son was asked to do this in however many years' time, what would you hope that he would say?

M.A.: Wow, that's an amazing question ... I hope he'd say that I was a fun mum; that I had high expectations of him but that that was balanced with fun. I hope he would say he had enjoyed his childhood.

The interview transcript also records a rich post-interview conversation with Samson during which he described young black men using being raised by a single-parent mother home as "a signifier" in their constructed narratives of struggle, which he appeared to object to:

It isn't the problem ... in fact a lot of time it's better than you having both parents because things might have been worse. You don't know, your parents might have been arguing all the time. *Samson*

Such interactions were regularly replicated in my research interactions with participants. Advice was given about getting through "the teenage years", while mothers shared frustrations about the single-parentist assumptions they had encountered. Some of the mothers who had been student parents expressed an interest in doing a PhD themselves. One of them, Juliet, later informed me that she had secured a university place and a research supervisor. Other topics outside of the interview ranged from experiences in academia to discussions about black families. Some of the participants were also interested in what the research would do, beyond earning me a credential; they felt it was important that the information generated by the study should be made available beyond the academic sphere. Suggestions made by participants on the form this could take included a pamphlet and a report. "I can see a report being used in schools," said Natalie, a teacher, "it being standard reading for white teachers".

Interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed apart from the interview which took place over social media. I worked with some of the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz

2013). My approach was inductive, in that I was not seeking to substantiate a theory. This was an open and exploratory project, and I allowed themes and findings relevant to my research questions to emerge from the data. I used Quirkos the qualitative analysis software to facilitate the analysis process. Transcripts and interview notes were analysed using a process described by Fielding (2001). After reading and re-reading transcripts, I began with 'open coding,' highlighting anything of significance to the research questions. The next step was building upon this with 'axial coding,' seeing which topical categories were related. From here I did 'systemic building' (Hodkinson 2008:87), beginning with many themes and combining those that came through most strongly to create bigger conceptual themes while trying to ensure codes were thematically distinct. The codes thematically arranged my findings. Having said that, occasionally I focused on illuminating anomalies for their significance. One example of this was the very small minority of the sample of sons, who had difficult relationships with their mothers but who were remaining on track nonetheless. I discuss these sons' experiences in Chapter 7 because this insight speaks to claims that weak parental relationships are a causal factor in youth deviance.

In conclusion

This chapter has outlined how the study was carried out and the considerations which informed my methodological decisions. At the beginning of the chapter, I argued that methods which amplify less-heard voices and stories have generative potential, and are vital for new understandings and social change. This is important for new, 'resistant knowledge' on single-mother family structure and its intersections. Relatedly, I explained a biographical interview method was chosen to build a fuller understanding of the realities of dyads' lives. I critically reflected upon notions of how my positional proximity to the sample may have impacted interview interactions and suggested that it is not problematic to be partial and to work with ameliorative intent as long as one is open to what is revealed to them in the research field. The necessity of personal and socially sensitive research topics being handled with care by researchers was discussed and the practical experience of carrying out the research, from sampling to writing up, was retrospectively thought through. The findings produced by the study are documented and analysed in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 5. The Perspectives and Realities of Dyads

This chapter examines dyads' perspectives on family structure and their narrated experiences of it. In the absence of a critical and constructive perspective on family structure/gender/race legitimating this parent-child relationship, participants' narratives were impacted by intersectional cultural constructions and resultant stigma. Stigma about the single mother-son dyad persists despite growing recognition that the heteropatriarchal nuclear family is not universal, that families exist in diverse forms, as scholars have argued (Reynolds 2005:33-40; Nelson 2006; Golombok 2015; Reed 2018), and growing literature demonstrating that gendered beliefs about the family constitution boys need may be erroneous (Drexler 2005; Langa 2010). The single-mother household as a general social category has been subject to stigma (see Goffman 1963) as it transgresses heteropatriarchal standards (Ferguson 2004:22-27). In not meeting normative standards it is discredited (Goffman 1963:13-14). Goffman (1963) critically observed how 'transgressors' are perceived as inferior, dangerous and deviant, with stigmatisation functioning as a means of "formal social control" through social and self-regulation. From this perspective, single-mother black families would be understood as being stigmatised due to their interconnected race and family difference. Charlotte Morris and Sally Munt (2019:232) observe that social control of single mothering "has been pursued by disciplinary acts of shaming". This indicates that dominant discourses around the single black mother-son dyad are ideological.

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first focuses on mothers' and sons' perspectives on the family structure and their differing responses to stigma. The second examines mothers' concerns about sex difference within the dyad, including a common concern among mothers that they did not have the right knowledge and experience as women to effectively socialise sons. In the third section, participants' narratives about their dyadic relationships are analysed. The different approaches used to prepare sons for racism in English society are focused on in the fourth section and the final part of the chapter focuses on the types of support drawn on by mothers and sons. The data analysed in this chapter indicates overall that dyads' family lives contradict the discursive framing outlined in Chapter 1. This signals the need for a counter-

discourse which can speak back to stereotypes and eradicate racist/sexist single parentism, which advocates for black single mothers and their children and reclaims family structure.

5.1 Perspectives on single motherhood

Critical and constructive knowledge about black single-mother families and single mother-son dyadic relationships is 'subjugated knowledge' (Foucault 1980; Collins 1991; Hartman 2000). This meant that participants' perspectives tended to respond to ubiquitous, negative meanings about their family structure. Studies on stigmatised mothers (Bush 2004; Mannay 2014; Banister *et al.* 2016; Elliot, Brenton and Powell 2019; Morris and Munt 2019) have indicated the clear awareness people hold about the negative meanings attached to their social positioning. Previous studies have found distancing and disidentification to be a common response to being part of a socially stigmatised group (Skeggs 1997:74; Dow 2015; Banister *et al.* 2016; Morris and Munt 2019). It is suggested that this manoeuvring is done in an attempt to negate shame (Morris and Munt 2019) and negative valuation (Skeggs 1997). For mothers, it was easier for them to talk about a type of single mother they had not wanted to be as there appeared to be few references to alternative, empowered visions of single motherhood. The images described below by participant mothers Audrey, 47, and Juliet, 50, referred to dominant and distorted representations of single motherhood which they had not wanted to be associated with:

I didn't want to be that kind of mother where you are in a council place and you're not educated, you're not working. I was really aware of that stereotype, that I didn't want that for me. I think even kicking back against that stereotype made me stay in a relationship that was long dead because I wanted to achieve that image of a family; moving forward and professional.

Audrey

It was a conscious decision that I made, that I wasn't going to be that single mother who was signing on, who maybe had different men in their lives, who was maybe depressed and down, and their kids were left to roam the streets. I wasn't going to be that mother.

Juliet

The mothers demonstrated knowledge of specific stereotypes of single motherhood, those which were in threatening proximity to their circumstances. These were typically intersectional social constructions, encompassing distorted images of class, race, sexuality and gender. Natalie, 35, had become a single parent as a teenager and her narrative about stereotypes referenced the

“benefit scrounger” trope (Roseneil and Mann 1996). This trope depicts women becoming mothers to access state benefits and other resources such as housing. Natalie had become a single mother around the end of the 1990s, a decade when the stigmatisation of single-parent women by British politicians and the press was arguably at its peak (see Phoenix 1996; Duncan, Edwards and Song 1999; Kirby 2009). As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, social stigma intensified against the backdrop of anxiety about family change and calls by the Conservative government for a return to tradition through its Back to Basics campaign (see Roseneil and Mann 1996:197-198; Duncan, Edwards and Song 1999). Natalie drew on the benefit scrounger trope in her sense-making:

I think the media and the narrative of who to blame have changed...in the 90s it was single parents... The common narrative was for them to claim the dole, stay at home, get a flat, dress the baby up in designer clothes and push it in a pram. It was very much a media-driven narrative but there were enough real-life examples for me to see that this was common. ...Most of those girls that I'm still in touch with... haven't got a degree, are not in a professional career, and have gone on to have quite a few children after the first one.

Natalie

Natalie appeared to uphold negative judgements about others in her position, demonstrating the pervasiveness of dominant stereotypes (Phoenix 1997:64), which can be internalised by members of categories. There is a notion that one way in which social actors can deflect stigma from themselves, is through the “avowed acceptance” of value-laden interpretations of their discredited group (Goffman 1963). Underpinning many of these mothers’ reflections on perceptions of single motherhood was a desire to transcend these negative meanings, to be extended legitimacy, value and respect as mothers.

In her observations of how single-parent black women were discussed, Juliet referred to the 'babymother' trope: “you only hear the stories like ‘she’s got children by different men,’ and it makes it look like it’s something that’s just the norm among us and it’s not”. The babymother stereotype (Song and Edwards 1996:235; Reynolds 1997, 2005) is a caricature associated with black women who have children with different uncommitted men. The sociologist Tracey Reynolds observes that the babymother trope has long been one of the main “pathologised and racialised images of black mothering” that has become “common sense discourse” (Reynolds 2005:29). An intersectional cultural construction exclusive to working-class black women, mothers were socially

positioned in proximity of the babymother trope. There was, and remains a lack of positive and empowering images of single black motherhood.

Cultural constructions and stereotypes can be understood as 'controlling images' which work to shape perceptions of social groups as well as the ways social actors can view themselves (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009:22). Negative image tropes of single black mothers in western societies such as the UK and US could be viewed as the regulation of subversive family forms and sexuality deemed non-normative (Cohen 1997:455). Social control through stigmatisation serves to warn other women against transgressing the patriarchal social order. As *black single-parent women*, a multiply-subjugated category, mothers have had the collective power to challenge dominant and discrediting representations.

There were some more ambivalent responses to negative narratives about single mothering. Ann, 51, refuted the notion that the single-mother household was inadequate for raising children:

I don't agree. There are plenty of women throughout history who have raised strong, balanced, respectable and happy boys. Women are the nurturers usually. Obviously having one income, and one person to care for and do everything can be more difficult than having two but if the single parent was a man same would apply. Ann

Ann points out that given the fact women typically bear excessive responsibility for childrearing and carework in families, the problematisation of single-mother households is nonsensical. Theresa, 60, was rare among the mothers in her rejection of marriage. She described the domestic exploitation of elder women that she had observed growing up and the related gendered double standards: "before when you got married, you gave up your name, and it's like women were chattel, we were a bargaining tool". She also rejected the dominant perspectives of 'unmarried motherhood', as an expectant mother in the late 1970s: "There was a lot of negativity around my situation, but because of the person I am, I didn't allow it to affect me because this was my choice". While these perspectives do not seek to create distance from single motherhood they do not positively identify with it or attempt to reclaim it either.

Sons tended to defend the single-mother family structure, in comparison to mothers' ambivalence and distancing. This could be because they were further distanced from tropes than mothers. Most sons viewed the disregard and devaluation of single mothers as unfair and unjust. There is the perspective that men who have witnessed gendered inequality and domination up close may

adopt a perspective sympathetic to feminism (see Adu Poku 2004). Sons did not mention feminism explicitly, but they saw and disidentified the double standards to which mothers were held:

I think it's unfair because now there is this narrative that you should expect single mothers to be strong ... But no parent should have to raise their child by themselves. There were two people involved in making this child, so it should be equal responsibility. I know the world doesn't work like that...I just feel like suddenly it's become too accepting...it's the norm for single mothers should do both jobs, they should work, they should cook, they should clean, they should do everything for their children – but they also have lives. That's one thing I've sort of looked back and realised. My mum ... did not have her own life. *Vince*

I mean there's a frustration because it's almost a generational thing of these independent women who are battling with things by themselves, who end up carrying things on their back, struggling on and pushing. *Samson*

Describing their perceptions of the single mother role, both Samson, 21, and Vince, 22, identified the heavy weight of responsibility carried by mothers, recognising their disproportionate and hidden labour as parents, which is an ongoing theme in feminist literature (Hochschild 2012[1989]; Lockman 2019; Lewis 2019). Vince seemed to suggest that the vulnerability of mothers was overlooked (a theme explored in chapter 6). Michael, 39, had a similar perspective about the labour done by mothers: “[it’s] a lot of pressure to put on one person” he said. From this perspective of sons, it was gendered inequality and unrealistic social expectations that were the problem, not single-parent women or the family structure.

Among sons, there was also a rejection of the notion that the single-mother household was inferior to the heterosexual nuclear family structure. Samson asserted: “there are loads of women raising children by themselves who have got a husband right there next to them,” implying that single parenting was perhaps a more honest organisation of the labour done by women in families. Literature on whether being raised by a single-parent woman develops a feminist consciousness among young men is emerging (see O’Reilly 2001; Wells 2001; Langa 2010) and the question is worthy of further exploration.

Contrary to sexist assumptions (see Sewell 2009) most sons appeared to value their mothers. It is unknown whether sons were using the opportunity of the research interview to pay tribute to their mothers and to counter negative narratives about single black mothers. What was clear was that sons did acknowledge the labour done by mothers as sole or main parents to raise them. When I described some of the stereotypes around single mothering, Jeremiah, 22, responded: “if anything, I feel like my Mum has done *more* for me as a sole parent”. Other sons detailed the ways they saw their mothers as having been effective parents:

My mum taught me how to cook, she taught me how to clean... Even though she's not a man, she taught me a lot about my body which most sons would get from their father or father figure - my mum taught me just fine. *Lenny*

Vince spoke of a time in his life when he got into trouble often and his mother had been dependable despite a demanding schedule as an NHS nurse:

My mum worked pretty much every day. She had to come from work, and come to the police station; police stations take forever. I'd go home – she'd go back to work. And that's something I think about quite a lot actually: “she didn't sleep” Like she's working pretty much every day, and she would still put up with the police station... And that is one of the things that made me think, “Vince, you need to fix up now...” *Vince*

Participants' narratives detailed here demonstrate the impact of intersectional social constructions of single motherhood on subjects' meanings. Multiply-positioned across categories of difference, categories which are typically distorted and mischaracterised (Lorde 2007:115), participants had a clear awareness of the dominant negative meanings of single motherhood. Mothers recognised that cultural imagery of single motherhood was not mono-categorical, but co-shaped by other social categories; these drew on stereotypes of blackness, single-parent family structure, working classness and womanhood, for example, the babymother trope. Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013:795) show how the framework of intersectionality reveals the social workings of categories as not separate but permeated by one another, “always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power”. As critically reflected upon by Brah (1996:117) the limited range of cultural discourses available impacts subjects. Intersectional cultural constructions were omnipresent references for participants referred in their meaning-making, limiting their positions on single motherhood to defence, ambivalence and internalisation. In the absence of a counter-discourse on family structure, none of the mothers or sons felt able to positively identify with family

structure. Even in the sons' positive reframing, they were defensive of single motherhood rather than assertive. Distorted constructions of single black motherhood arguably preclude not only positive, self-affirming identification with the category but also solidarity within it, which ultimately has broader ramifications for family structure equality.

5.2 Mothers' perspectives on sex difference

This section focuses on participants' narratives of sex difference in the single mother-son dyad. The matter of sex difference loomed large in most mothers' accounts. Gendered thinking, which at times was thought about in combination with race, shaped what mothers believed their sons required to develop in normative ways and how much of this they felt able to provide as the female parent. Many of the mothers described anxiety that they would be unable to raise their sons for their socially prescribed role. Research with boys raised in mother-only households found that while they possessed a broader set of traits, including some that might be deemed feminine, they were not less masculine than sons raised with resident fathers (MacCallum and Golombok 2004; Drexler 2005). Such academic knowledge has not become conventional wisdom. In the absence of a critical thought tradition on family structure/gender theorising and legitimating this parent-child relationship, a belief that adult male presence or involvement in some form was important for sons was prevalent among mothers.

The majority of the mothers spoke of viewing their parenting task as raising a man as opposed to raising a human. Alice shared her view: "I could raise him to be a good person," she said, "but there were certain aspects that you needed male input for". For her, mothers "would never 'get it' fully", as women, because we are not supposed to - it's not in our make-up". Some mothers seemed to have essentialised masculinity, reducing it to a distinct character believed to be male-specific. For example, "loving football, loving computer games" was mentioned by one mother as something specific to masculinity that mothers would be unlikely to participate in, showing the persuasiveness of gender stereotypes. Masculinity was also stereotyped in terms of gendered ways of being: "as a woman, I don't think you can fulfil certain things because I think men tend to be more macho," said Theresa, "there's that bravado..." From this view, male guidance is needed to support sons in negotiating gendered landscapes of the social world. Audrey recalled her anxiety: "For me, my son was growing up in a household full of girls. What did I know about teaching him to be a man?" Alice had also commented on the volume of females in the family environment at another point in our conversation, and what she perceived as the consequences of gender-imbalance in boys' lives: "I think that's why there are so many effeminate men". Notions

of normative gender were common among mothers, which appeared to have a disempowering effect, in limiting their confidence in raising their sons. These perspectives also demonstrate mothers' belief that socialisation predominately takes place in the home rather than through social learning (Sayers 1987:27). Mothers' did not believe that their sons would undergo sufficient socialisation in the social world. This is arguably due to the need for parenting discourse which focuses on dyads at the intersection of family structure and gender.

Some of the mothers said they had been concerned about lacking experiential knowledge of what black men face in society. Natalie recalled: "I always knew that I couldn't be a father... I definitely don't know what it means to be a black man well enough". There was a presumption that due to young black men's complex experience of race, including their criminalisation (Gilroy 1982; Williams and Clarke 2018; Andrews 2019), sons would face more racism or a type different to the forms encountered by black women. However, there is evidence to challenge this dominant assumption (Sisters Uncut 2016; Booth and Modin 2018). As some mothers spoke of facing forms of racism themselves and of drawing on the vicarious experiences of male relatives and partners to inform their expectations of what their sons might face, this shows they may have underestimated the value of their experience and knowledge. Later in the chapter, mothers' preparation of sons for racism is detailed.

Beyond preparation for an inequitable society, there was the view that male guidance would be supportive to adolescent sons to make sense of their identities in the transition to manhood, as described by Margaret, 51:

I suppose there is that transition and hormones are all over the place, and they want something to identify with. A mother can't be that male role model or that male figure who that boy can identify with. They are sort of questioning their identity, and I think having that male presence, a role model in their lives is helpful. I look at kids who I know who haven't had that and see how they turned out. *Margaret*

Margaret went on to provide two vignettes, describing situations that could have also occurred in the idealised nuclear family. This was not the only time during interviews when stories of other dyads were shared with it being implied that the presence of an adult male figure could have improved a situation. Participant mothers drew on similar common sense logic used in dominant

discourses to make sense of complex situations. At times it felt as if mothers were trying to make sense of the single black mother-son dyad with me.

Black mothers' beliefs about their inability to raise sons have been explored in previous research (Bush 2004). Also relevant to this discussion is research which found there is no significant difference in the approach described by black mothers and fathers in preparing sons for adulthood (Hrabowski, Maton and Greif 1998:58-59, 95-96), and another on children raised in single-parent families which found that there was no benefit to children's outcomes in their living with the same-sex parent (Downey and Powell 1993). Yet, gendered thinking on parenting remains entrenched, precluding mothers' self-efficacy. "Rather than dichotomising parenting roles," write Sinekka Elliot and colleagues (2019:452), "conceptualising the work of raising children in terms of caring or carework, regardless of who does it, would... challenge the ideology of gender difference that underlies the gender hierarchy". Gendered thinking also extended to some women's perspectives on the ideal household composition for sons. Natalie felt her male partner joining the household provided an important balance:

...when my partner moved in, I was still cutting my son's toenails for him, and shampooing his hair and those things, because that's what I had always done. And he was like: "He's coming up for 11 now. Do you really need to be doing this?" ... And I think if he hadn't been there, there wouldn't have been that balance. *Natalie*

Natalie, 35, seemed to believe that her mothering needed to be tempered, based on notions of "over-mothering" and "molly cuddling" sons and the perceived consequences of this for boys' gendered development. Such narratives can add to a single mother's dilemma about whether she is doing too little or not enough, a tension exacerbated by the deviant characterisation of black single mothering. There were mixed views about what an imagined father figure in the home space could demonstrate to sons. Some mothers thought about this concerning the sharing of domestic labour. For Maya, 61, a "positive" presence would involve a man demonstrating that housework was not women's work:

They need that image of a male, and that male has to be positive where they're contributing, and not just "where's my dinner?" They go and do housework... Not just think it's a woman's role to do that. *Maya*

However, there was also recognition that male presence would not necessarily mean an improvement to family life, and could risk the induction of sons into a sexist understanding of household roles, as demonstrated in the comments of Alice:

I know many people where the man lives in the home, but they are just useless ... Sometimes, to me, you are better off by yourself because that man is not serving any purpose whatsoever – they are just taking up space. When some people say, “but the man should be in the house”, if he is providing a good example and a template for his son, by all means. But if he’s doing none of those things, and he’s only actually causing you heartache and stress, and even when the school calls or things happen, you are the one going up there by yourself. When they call, it’s you that they are calling all the time, you are just recounting those stories back to him, he’s not actually with you on that journey, then there’s no point. Because all your boy child is going to learn from that man is: “I sit back and do nothing” - what is that? *Alice*

Mothers did not talk explicitly about raising feminist men (see Thomas 2001; hooks 2004; Adu Poku 2004; Bola 2019b: 63-71). This is not surprising as feminism rarely came up during interviews, possibly due to its failure to engage with black women’s circumstances, including single-parent family structure. However, some mothers did mention being concerned that their sons were domestically proficient, participated in domestic labour and that they were respectful of women.

I suggest that mothers’ anxieties about parent-child sex difference were informed by family rhetoric which purports the ideal family for childrearing as being heterosexual and nuclear in constitution and structure. Living against this dominant view, mothers view their single-mother family as lacking, and inadequate for the development of their sons. As discussed in Chapter 2, there is growing evidence that successful and supportive parent-child relationships are not gender-dependent (Russell and Sabel 1997; Bush 2004; Langa 2010), a position the findings of this study support.

Single mothers’ concerns about the inadequacy of their households for sons demonstrate the need for more attention to the neglected location of dyads, which is at the intersection of blackness, single-parent family structure, motherhood and masculinity. As dyads are positioned at neglected points of the intersection, they are impacted by a lack of constructive narratives

relevant to their varied realities. This demonstrates the need for a critical and constructive knowledge project focused on this phenomenon.

5.3 Parent-child communication

The mother-son dyadic relationship is regarded as critical in the single-mother family – this section examines the ways participants spoke about their experiences of these. In this family structure, present mothers are the sole or main parental figure in children's lives. There is a pessimistic and sexist notion that as sons of single mothers develop autonomy, bonds and communication diminish, mothers lose authority and sons begin to engage in bad behaviour (see Sewell 2009; Phillips 2011; Lammy 2011; Cameron 2011). Such claims are unsubstantiated, and this is something a critical and constructive discourse on family structure and its intersections could investigate and theorise on. From dominant perspectives, this dyadic relationship is not significant to a young man. Departing from such assumptions, the following discussion focuses on what participants said about the closeness of bonds, styles of communication, and the resolution of conflict.

Like any parent-child relationship, the dyadic relationships of participants had peaks and troughs and across the sample of sons, the types of parent-child communication described varied widely. Harlem-King described difficulties communicating with his mother:

I think I'm quite good at separating things through an emotional lens and through a lens of logic. But we can't always do that, and I think trying to have conversations with my mum that aren't easy have proven that to be true. They always end up being overly emotional.

Harlem-King

In our interview, Lenny described his mother as supportive, and their relationship as close, but punctuated by conflict: "We are very alike so we've had fallings out, we've had big falling outs, and there have been times where I've had to go and stay at my grandma's because it's been such a big bust up." There is a view that parent-child conflict is not necessarily negative, depending on the strength of the emotional bond:

Parent-adolescent conflict is not only normative but also fosters communication that is integral to the necessary realignment of relationship roles. This constructive process is most likely to occur when conflicts are neither extreme nor persistent and when they arise in a relationship characterised by warmth and closeness.

(Laursen and Collins 2004:344)

Samson recalled ease in communicating with his mother, indicating connectedness: "I felt like I could speak to her and approach her with stuff. She's just been interested, she's demonstrated that she's someone you can trust". For Laursen and Collins (2004:337), trust is an indicator of parent-child closeness and other indicators include "companionship," "interdependence" and "intimacy."

Jay, 28, recognised a change in the dyadic relationship across time, but felt the bond between mother and son had been maintained:

I know there was a time when I didn't behave. She'd tell me to wash the dishes or something like that, and I'd be like, "no" and ignore her ... I don't know how it changed, ... it changed after a while. I think over the years, I've actually kept my close relationship with her.

Jay

The importance of open communication with children was spoken of by many of the mothers. This was important as a way of staying connected and maintaining meaningful interaction. It is suggested that it is ordinary, everyday actions such as conversation that build and strengthen bonds (Morgan 2011:n.p., 2019;). For Morgan (2019:2231) it is such practices which produce and reaffirm family relationships. Research participants described conversations about children's experiences and emotions, the nature of society and dynamics within the family. JJ said regarding her son "I found he was more open than his sister. He talks to me about most things", an experience which raises questions about gendered assumptions of personality. It was unclear how much mothers shared about themselves, however. In chapter 6, the ways mothers shielded their offspring from any difficult emotions experienced are discussed.

Some mothers described attempting to have a democratic household, feeling it was positive for children to "have a voice" in the domestic space. This was described as a marked departure from the hierarchical and authoritarian households of mothers' childhoods, where there were clear distinctions between adults and children and lines of communication were typically one-way, from

parent to child. This pattern can be characterised as an "intergenerational discontinuity" in parenting style (Campbell and Gilmore 2007). JJ described parent-child negotiation in her house: "I think I was firm but fair with them, and unlike with our parents they were able to say, 'Mum, can we discuss that?'" Juliet recalled her mother also having the belief that free-flowing child-to-parent communication could work to threaten the family order; consequentially as a child, she felt unable to share things with her, and this was a dynamic described by other participant mothers. Juliet said: "I couldn't talk to my mum. Maybe that's why I made a pact with myself that when I had children, that wasn't going to happen. So, we are all very open." Similarly, Alice spoke of her two children having an "input in some things" and explained the decision to do things this way stemmed from her own childhood experience:

When I was growing up, you couldn't really have a say, and it was very frustrating... it used to drive me crazy... I think one of the problems in our community is the way our hierarchy has been working – our hierarchy system doesn't work on necessarily what's right, or what makes sense, it's just based on age. *Alice*

Alice characterised the age-based hierarchy experienced during her own childhood as oppressive, regarding this style of family organisation as arbitrary. In departing from the styles of family communication into which they were socialised, mothers exercise agency as heads of household. Some women disidentified with the approach of their parents and reimagined ways of doing parenting, countering the erroneous assumption that social actors unthinkingly reproduce their own unhappy experiences of family life (as discussed in Manlove 2001: 220-221). Mothers' decisions and actions may in part have been influenced by their awareness of evolving parenting discourse. Intergenerational shifts from authoritarian to democratic parenting styles have been observed in research, reflecting a broader socio-cultural shift in childrearing (Jennifer Campbell and Linda Gilmore 2007). Some mothers actively encouraged sons to be expressive and to share thoughts and experiences. For a small number of mothers, this parent-child communication took the form of regular family meetings. Jazzy, spoke of instituting mother-son meetings later in her parenting trajectory and felt this was transformative to the dyadic relationship:

He could air out what he wanted then we could come together. I think that's important... If it's only you two then they have to have the ability to speak for themselves ... we can't just always be: "You need to do this! You need to do that!" Let them be free to say what they've got to say, then you know how they're feeling, so then we can work on that. It would be, "Mum I'm feeling stressed," or "you're always shouting at me." "OK, why do you think I shout at you?" You know it was like that ... I didn't restrict him. "Speak whatever it is: if you've got this amount of girls that are running you down, just spill it out and tell your mum [*laughs*] it will alleviate the stress". Because then we knew where we were at and then the respect came more because he was allowed to speak.

Jazzy

These meaningful conversations were arguably a constructive form of parent-child interaction (see Laursen and Collins 2004), particularly for dyads and families more broadly who found healthy communication a problem otherwise. Three key functions seemed to play a part in the dyadic relationship, First, it provided space for sons to express difficult feelings and share perspectives; second, it provided mothers with an opportunity to solicit information about their children's lives, an insight that enabled them to show understanding and offer support and third, these interactions kept dyads connected and fostered closeness. Mothers mentioned trying to reason with their children and negotiating some decisions. The importance of being able to recognise parental mistakes and apologise was also mentioned by some mothers. Alice had trained to become a counsellor and said she felt it had improved her parenting skills:

I can explain to them why I'm apologising and help them understand... it helps because I think there are all those unspoken things that people carry and resentment comes up ... you have to be able to address them with your child ... Because you can't unsay anything you've said.

Alice

While young people might appreciate this parental engagement, such practices of listening, negotiating and apologising over years of parenting are tantamount to significant amounts of maternal labour, which required time, energy and emotion. Attempting to listen to their children without defence or judgement would have involved emotional labour (Hochschild 2012[1983]), in displaying an emotion regarded desirable while feeling otherwise (Wilkinson 2018). It is important to highlight this as recognition of the work that mothering involves is rarely forthcoming. There are a couple of reasons this is likely unacknowledged: because the full realities of carework are hidden behind closed doors (Crittenden 2004); because it is undervalued because the labour is

not directly profit-producing (Davis 2019[1981]), and it is marginalised because it is gendered work (Hochschild 2012[1989]). At the intersection of family structure/gender, mothers bare excessive responsibility for speaking with and listening to children. While a gendered asymmetry of carework is commonplace (hooks 1984; Schwarz 1994; Adichie 2017; Lockman 2019; Luthar and Ciciolla 2015), it is heightened in single-mother family households. This is one gendered dimension of single mothers' experiences at the intersection of family structure/gender which has been overlooked by relevant thought traditions such as feminism.

As mentioned, some participants spoke of times of conflict in the dyadic relationship. During such occasions, a small portion of the mothers participating mentioned asking a man to intervene – usually a brother and family friend. Alice was one of the mothers who favoured “male input”: “My brothers are good mediators, and they would talk to him,” she recalled. Elliot, Brenton and Powell (2018) characterise such practice as “drawing on male power.” For them, it “reflects and reinforces mothers' deauthorisation as women” (2018:447), “reinforces male dominance in families” and may produce “competing hierarchies between... masculinity and femininity” (2018:452). Natalie was critical of using male assistance for behaviour management but understood the practice in the context of mothers' multiple responsibilities.

I don't think it should be divided into male or female or good cop-bad cop, it's just whoever is ready to deal with things on that day and can be most effective... That thing: “*When your father gets home*”, I avoided it because I parented for 10 years without that, there was no deferring it to anybody else... I just dealt with it, good and bad. But I can see if you are a single parent and you're working hard, you don't necessarily want to then be the one to come and have to make an argument happen, so I think it's more avoidance, wanting to live a quiet life rather than not being able to parent.

Natalie

For Natalie using male assistance for conflict resolution took the pressure off mothers, which in her view was understandable in the context of their multiple roles as workers (Hochschild 2012[1989]; Reynolds 2005:99-103; Dow 2016) as well as the default parent (hooks 1984:140-146; Lockman 2019) and informal heads of household (Emma 2017a, 2017b; Ciciolla and Luthar 2015). Santiago spoke of feeling patronised when male family friends would talk with him at his mother's request: “in my head, I'm like, 'I'm really smart, not an idiot. Don't get some foreigner to talk to me,’” he said. “I won't agree with mum's point just because you're a man... I will sit here and still argue my point”.

Two of the sons, Santiago and Vince, described poor communication with mothers they characterised as emotionally distant. Although these experiences were anomalous among the sample, they are discussed because they indicate that sons may not respond to difficult family situations in the deviant ways alleged (as critically discussed in Lawrence 1982a:78; and see Patterson 1965:296; Scarman 1981:25; Swann 1985; Gayle 2018) but in a range of ways.

Vince talked about communication with his single mother as minimal – his description of their relationship suggested their parent-child interactions were insufficient and that there was a lack of a strong bond:

I would say our relationship is not an emotional one and it's partly to do with the fact that the first carers who I knew were my aunty and grandma. So, I feel like that's where that primary socialisation [happened] and ... the first mother I knew was my grandma. So, in coming here, obviously, I remembered my mum, but it was just like, "but my grandma is in Jamaica". And ever since then because my mum's been working so much, it's been very difficult to sort of build on that. We aren't very close. We don't really talk about much... I only update her on what I'm doing. *Vince*

Vince described an experience of child-shifting (Pottinger 2005; Reynolds 2005:37-40), described by Tracey Reynolds (2005:38) as "the shifting of child-rearing responsibility from the mother to other female kin, on a permanent or temporary basis." This practice often takes place in the context of mothers' migration (Pottinger 2005). Vince joined his mother in London from Jamaica at age six. For him, the separation had had a detrimental impact on their parent-child relationship, and as Vince's mother worked demanding hours, he felt there had not been an opportunity to build a bond between them. He spoke of feeling more connected to the women relatives who cared for him during his early years. What was striking was Vince appeared to hold no resentment toward his mother. He may not have wanted to share that in a research interview, but he did speak about wanting to be able to support her financially later in life. His comments indicated he empathised with his mother, possibly because Vince observed how hard his mother was working to support their family, in London as well as in Jamaica, and how she was dependable in practical ways when needed – recall part of Vince's story shared above, which details his mother having repeatedly collected him from the police station between shifts. It seemed that to Vince, such acts seem to demonstrate his mother's commitment to and investment in him. Another participant son, Santiago, described a difficult relationship with his mother:

My mum's emotionally mute. So, she did not show her emotions, so that made communication very platonic...mummy won't give you a hug, mummy won't give you a hug even if you were to ask for the hug. So then when she was working it was like, okay, you're not emotionally and physically there, but you are financially there. When mum stopped working it was like "well, what are you giving to your children now?"

Santiago

In Santiago's view, a lack of emotional connection and a lack of intimacy resulted in a lack of dyadic closeness (see Laursen and Collins 2003). He described the lack of parent-child communication as frustrating. The narrations of Vince and Santiago demonstrate two important things. Firstly, these unfortunate experiences of weak dyadic bonds show the consequences of social organisation in which the responsibility for children is assigned to one person. In a society where childrearing was a more collective endeavour (McIntosh and Barrett 2015[1982]:47-53; hooks 1984:140-146; Lewis 2019:149-153), mothers could be liberated from such heavy responsibility, and a weak parent-child relationship would have less impact. McIntosh (1996:156) argues mothers' responsibility for children is disproportionate.

It is important to underscore, without minimising these experiences, the fact that sons were able to withstand this difficulty; the broader stories of Santiago and Vince demonstrated their tenacity despite weak mother-son bonds. It signals that non-normative or difficult relationships with mothers may not cause an undoing in young people as implied by some of the inferiorising narratives outlined in chapter 1. This assumption denies the resilience and agency of young people.

The data analysed in this section shows that dyads generally had normative relationships, a contradiction to intersectional social constructions of single-black mother homes as neglectful and unsupportive (see Patterson 1965; Moynihan 1965; Scarman 1982; Sewell 2009). Mothers and sons typically described close dyadic relationships which included standard levels of conflict and tension. Mothers drawing on theoretical knowledge on 'family democracy', a departure from their family experience, is one example of efforts made to ensure their children's experiences of family life were positive and nurturing. The discussion above showed that communication within dyadic relationships varied but tended toward meaningful and 'healthy' communication as mothers sought to develop a democratic environment. Fostering a democratic, open and expressive household demanded the time, energy, commitment and emotional labour of mothers, revealing

the nature of some forms of parental labour at the intersection of single-parent family structure and motherhood.

What is striking about the narratives of a small portion of the sons who had distant relationships with their mothers was that this circumstance did not affect their life trajectories in the ways claimed. This undermines some of the narratives detailed in Chapter 1 about the social ramifications of the single mothering of sons. The various realities of single-parent black families have been concealed by problem-focused approaches and distorted assumptions. The details of dyadic relationships and dyads' family lives show the valuable insight available when neglected points of the intersection are examined.

5.4 Preparation for a racist world

Mothers' and sons' accounts revealed distinctive dimensions of experience at the intersection of race/family structure. Many participants' narratives detailed the maternal agency of mothers in their actions to build resistant capital (Yosso 2005) in their children. For Yosso, (2005:80) resistant capital refers to "knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behaviour that challenges inequality... grounded in the legacy of resistance to subordination exhibited by communities of colour". Mothers prepared children for racism by building social-historical knowledge, developing critical thinking skills and imparting practical knowledge for possible racist encounters, and sons underwent racial socialisation in preparation for the social conditions. This is one way that race changes experiences of parenthood and youth, exacerbating the challenges of single mothering and growing up, demonstrating the need for critical knowledge at the intersection of single-mother family structure and blackness, which acknowledges and engages with this additional yet overlooked dimension of experience. To repeat a finding discussed above which is relevant here; mothers believed they were inadequate for the task of raising their sons due to sex difference within the dyad. This was in part due to their perceived lack of knowledge of an imagined 'black male experience,' showing the impact of gendered thinking on mothers' self-efficacy. The social consciousness and action of mothers detailed in narratives demonstrate they were in fact able to sufficiently support their sons against the backdrop of the social conditions. Yet this distinctive form of labour remains ignored at the societal level.

Among some mothers was the perception that the English education system could not be relied upon to provide their children with relevant socio-political knowledge. Literature has highlighted a perspective among some black parents that mainstream education could lead their children to

regard black people as inferior (Woodson 2000; Demie and McLean 2017:39-40). Audrey described her frustration with English schooling in this regard:

If I hear about Martin Luther King during Black History Month one more time – there’s more to Black people’s history than that, but there was always just that. My son did history and that covered civil rights... he was able to write eloquent essays on that, and he got an A ... which tells you that they are thirsty for knowledge of themselves, and that kind of cultural identity, but it's just limited to a short module on the history course or confined to Black History Month.

Audrey

Social action to improve the way such knowledge is taught in the English education system is ongoing. The struggle to have 'black history' more fully included in the school curriculum is ongoing (Reid 2019) as is the movement for the decolonising of higher education (Swain 2019). Mothers' agency in providing children with additional knowledge to build their resistant capital is best understood in this context. Actions detailed by many mothers and sons included the use of black supplementary schools where socio-cultural knowledge was taught, family attendance to public lectures and cultural events, doing black history projects together at home and the provision of culturally relevant and diverse reading material. Samson spoke about the efforts of his mother to build resistant capital in her three children:

She wanted us to just be immersed and continue learning and learning about ourselves, so she gave us books with positive imagery of ourselves, posters around our room, and stuff like that, and try to reinforce a positive mindset.

Samson

Samson described these actions as “very helpful, very spiritual, very positive”. For him, without this action: “I might not have been able to go out into the world and think much of myself”. In Samson’s view, the consciousness developed was important for psychic survival. Alice was another mother who described efforts to develop resistant capital in her children. She spoke of having conversations about the nature of society with her two children, and being pleased and relieved her children were able to think “analytically and critically” as adults. It is argued that this skill is vital for black people in racialised climates (hooks 2003:69). Alice also mentioned that she attended what she called ‘conscious events’, presentations and talks on black history, and described the positive effect she hoped these activities had:

[it's about] knowing about your history and your people just to instil that pride in them – no one chooses what colour they are born. But in this society, it seems like you could be persecuted for something that you had no choice in, so I needed to make sure that [son] was on board with himself so that when people react to him in a certain way he knows it's got nothing to do with him. *Alice*

For Alice, ways of thinking and forms of consciousness could deflect possible psychic impacts of racism. These accounts of mothers' parental agency to prepare and protect their children undermine the claim that sons of single black mothers are more vulnerable in racist societies because they do not have a father to model how to appropriately resist gendered racism (see Harker 2019:95).

Mothers sought to educate sons about the inequitable experiences they might face, the unusual experiences they might encounter due to their intersectional identities. Two main types of knowledge drawn on in this task – first, the life stories of brothers and other male relatives and second, experiential and professional knowledge developed through mothers' roles in fields such as social work and education.

Unjust police practice was one subject usually covered in such parent-child conversations. This is best understood in the context of longstanding racialised disparity in police stop and search practice (Presad 2011; StopWatch 2019), as well as a hidden history of police brutality against black people in the UK (see Aspen 2007; Athwal and Bourne 2015). Natalie said about this:

As a black parent, you have to deal with your son and say 'you're going to get stopped by the police'. I don't know when that conversation won't be necessary, but it is still necessary. I remember having that conversation when he was about nine because having a brother... I watched him go through it. *Natalie*

The memory of her brother's harassment by the police meant that for Natalie it felt like a parental duty to warn and prepare her son. In this way, family experiences, personal testimony of men racialised as black (Brooks and Hattenstone 2003; Akala 2018; Lammy 2019), as well as community rumours about police violence (Solomos 2011) create a concern exclusive to mothers and also a vulnerability exclusive their sons. For Alice, facing race-related social issues with children was indeed a matter of parental responsibility: "you have to be able to have these conversations with your children, otherwise you're sending your children out really ill-equipped for

the land in which they live.” Other mothers and sons spoke of having such conversations, including some sons recalling being told how to handle a stop and search encounter safely. Broader family discussions about the experiences of older male relatives contributed to sons’ knowledge. For Ann, who was involved in campaigning and activism, the knowledge she had was shared with her son in different forms – “he has had a stop and search advice card from young” – and was reinforced by her practical action: “he’s witnessed me engaging with police to prevent stop and search and harassment of black youth so he knows his rights.” JJ, 50, spoke of drawing on what she had learned through her working life as well as her degree studies in criminology and social work to educate her son about disparities in the criminal justice system:

[I’d explain] from different angles: “know that if this happens, being the colour you are, the outcome could be different”. And I had examples of that when I worked in law, seeing two people come up for sentencing and the black person got a higher sentence than the white one - despite the white person having more previous convictions, and being more involved in the crime, they’d get a lesser sentence. So, all these things I would keep on highlighting and especially for him, I kept on reminding him, “You are a young black boy. They have certain views of you when you are out there, that’s why I don’t want you hanging around certain places, that’s why I don’t want you doing certain things”.

JJ

Three points are important for this study in JJ’s words above. First, in the context of social conditions, a perceived need, common among mothers, is to educate sons about racial injustice in society. From this view, such warnings are a protective technique. It likely disrupts youthful innocence but in the social context, mothers feel they have no other choice. Second, in repeatedly reminding her son that he is “a young ‘black’ boy,” JJ unwittingly perpetuates the racialisation of her son, reifying - making real - the fallacious social construction that is ‘race’. Again, it feels like there is little choice but to let her son know how he is marked and perceived. Third, in restricting the activities of her son, JJ exerts constraints on her son that inadvertently reproduce racialised social subjugation. A similar observation was made in previous work with black mothers and sons in the North American context (see Dow 2016a). The responses to the racism that JJ describes are understandable; she is raising her racialised son in a racialised, post-colonial landscape in which anti-blackness is pervasive and, more specifically, black youth are demonised (Baker 2016). But this illustrates the delicate balance black mothers must strike in informing children of the realities of racist society (but not disempowering them and not legitimising ‘victimhood’ (see hooks 2003). Ann described her approach to the dilemma:

I told him the truth about the society he would grow up in, but also instilled a sense of worth, encouraged him to follow his dreams and aspirations, told him to not be deterred and that he could do and be whatever he wanted if he worked and focused on achieving it.

Ann

This raises an important question: how can parents of racialised children educate them about society without discouraging them? Again, this highlights the space for constructive discourse which engages with experiences at the intersection of family structure/race as thought traditions which singularly focus on family fail to fully address experiences of those simultaneously positioned in categories of difference, such as black single-parent families. The narrations above detail some of the ways race creates distinctive experiences of single motherhood and youth.

Parenting against a racialised landscape, mothers did additional labour to prepare for and protect their child(ren) from potential psychic harm. There was tension in the aims to both raise socio-political consciousness and confront harsh realities but also to keep sons confident and positive about the future. As O'Reilly observes:

Mothers of black sons must negotiate between the need to keep their sons physically safe while simultaneously promoting their psychological maturation. This pull between nurturance and protection is at the heart of raising the black male child... The Anglo-American thought centres on the taking away of power from sons, while for mothers of black men, it means bringing their sons *to* power. (O'Reilly 2001:113)

The actions outlined – utilising community education spaces, culturally-relevant educational materials and parent-child conversations about society - required women's time and labour resources, adding to the already significant demands faced as single mothers. Moreover, black children and youth may have to grow up faster than their counterparts and may experience greater constraints on their freedoms due to their social positioning, a theme developed later in later chapters.

The narratives in this section illuminate varied realities at the intersection of race/family structure/gender. The social reality of racism was something most mothers believed to be too important to ignore as parents; mothers' felt sons needed relevant historical and political knowledge as well as practical information in preparation for everyday racism. These intersectional dynamics shaped dyads' experiences in different ways. The single-parent family

structure meant mothers bore heavier responsibility, as the default parent, for carrying out this aspect of carework. Sons' race/gendered identity was viewed as generating specific risks which meant there were specific aspects of racial socialisation seen as especially important for them, preparation for possible encounters with police for example. Participants' narratives show distinctive experiences of parenthood and youth generated at intersections of blackness, single-parent family structure, motherhood and masculinity. A differential dimension of experience at underexplored locations of the intersection, this finding illuminates the need for a relevant critical and constructive knowledge project.

5.5 Social lives

This section briefly examines the social lives of dyads, including their broader circles of relationships and the spaces of community in which they find support. It has been asserted that focus on family structure overlooks the important roles of their support networks (Collins 1987; Boyd-Franklin 1989:191-204; Randolph 1995) and theorised that various factors mediate how well single-mother families function (Boyd-Franklin 1989). There is evidence that the principal among these is the economic well-being of single mothers (Randolph 1995:120; Harkness 2018) and, relatedly, mothers' education level (Härkönen 2018). However, whether or not dyads have a support network and if so, the nature of it is regarded as another key mediating factor for both mothers and children; taking account of these other relationships then is important in understanding mothers' and sons' experiences.

The majority of the families enjoyed kin support. In this way, most mothers were not alone in their parenting trajectory. Mothers' parents usually played a significant role as alternative caregivers to children; children's grandparents were spoken of repeatedly by mothers and sons as part of the organisation of everyday life. Grandparents often cared for children in the periods before and after school, supporting their working daughters. The majority of participants described this support. Sons also recalled this dynamic. Harlem-King recalled spending lots of time with his grandparents while his mother studied or travelled, saying "I owe a lot to them". Juliet and Theresa mentioned eating their evening meal at their parents' homes when collecting children after work – this act served to nurture mothers and children as well as alleviate them of the domestic task of cooking. The generosity of grandparents resolved other types of challenges faced by some mothers. For instance, Alice's children took turns living with their grandmother due to insufficient bedroom space for her son and daughter in her rented property; this meant the family's domestic space stretched across two locations within a short walk of each other. Other types of practical support

included help such as money-lending. Aunties and uncles were also mentioned by mothers and sons as playing key supportive roles in the family. For example, Juliet described her sister as her "rock" and additional support to her two children and Jeremiah, 22, spoke of doing a range of activities with his maternal uncles. Narratives show how supportive families often fill the space left by less active fathers.

Accounts showed that the 'density' of mothers' kin networks locally did vary, as not all of the single-parent women's families were London based. This indicates that black Londoners raising families may experience differing levels of family support. The families of some mother participants were geographically dispersed; a small portion had at least one parent who was residing in the Caribbean. For example, Audrey's mother had retired to Jamaica and as an only child, she did not have any close relatives in London. Having been a single parent to three children, she expressed having felt her mother's absence.

Some mothers' families were predominantly based in other English towns and cities, such as Sheffield and Wolverhampton. Ann also lacked family and relatives in the city but described establishing meaningful connections with others, including a local woman whom she met at her son's primary school and who offered to provide after-school care for her son as a means of support. This woman ended up assisting Ann over a few years and was described by Ann as "a good supportive friend and a great source of strength and wisdom". She also talked about building a supportive network among friends and colleagues while raising her son. Some of the ways that mothers found support among other women are discussed in the following accounts. Participants' accounts contradicted dominant assumptions about racialised single-parent households as breeding deviance (as discussed by Gilroy 1982:48-49; Lawrence 1982a:78). Samson described growing up in a large house owned by his grandmother, in which he lived with his grandparent, his mother and two siblings as well as his mother's sister. He described the multigenerational household as stimulating:

You have structures, so we'd always have Sunday dinner and we'd sit around the table as a family. Sometimes Granny would make food, so you know that you're eating food that you wouldn't get outside your house... It was a very familial atmosphere, people are communal, they involved each other in their experiences, people played music, and it was just a fun sort of atmosphere. I managed to build good relationships with other people...I think all these things shape you, give you an understanding of who you are and you then know what you are coming home to - you are coming home to something substantive that's going to add to you. *Samson*

Samson's description of his home signals that the heterogeneity among this category has been ignored. Another example of single-parent family life which is less seen at the societal level is Ann's description of how she sought to create "stability and security" for her son. She described this as including bedtime reading and set bedtimes, a routine during the week which included extra-curricular activities and outings, trips and visits during the weekend. While this is a positive counter-image of dyads' home lives it is important to recognise the hidden tension in it; while the type of structure described by Ann may be beneficial for children, it is likely to be experienced as a form of constraint for women. This speaks to forms of sacrifice made by single-parent women, which is addressed in the chapter which follows.

Narratives show that some mothers' friendships with other mothers were supportive, reflecting the findings of research which found that close personal friendship can be a factor in mothers' well-being (see Luthar and Ciciolla 2015). This was reflected in what mothers said about their relationships with other women. Juliet spoke of establishing long-lasting friendships at university as a student parent:

We were black women, we were single parents, and we would do things together... I think that's how we held it together. When my dad died, they were there for me. They were my age and we were in the same boat. *Juliet*

Natalie recalled the value of such friendships while raising her son, in her case with two black women who were also single mothers of sons:

I had another human being who was a mum to talk to, who was experiencing the same things as me and in a similar position. We were able to find the children a mixture of things to do. I think that forming your own mini-community is very helpful... it was about finding people who were interested in finding stuff to do and having those same concerns.

Natalie

Natalie's broader account indicates the value of spending time with others who empathise with the challenges of raising racialised children in an urban space, which is focused upon in Chapter 8. It is perhaps for this reason that Margaret mentioned searching for a group offering support to single mothers and being unable to find one that felt right for her:

I think a lot of it is geared towards mums who [pauses] they were disadvantaged, not for mums like how I was, who were working mums who were... not necessarily disadvantaged.

Margaret

Margaret's comment highlights a problem at the intersection of race, family structure, class and gender, namely the overlooked position of single black mothers earning a good wage. Single black mothers who are well-resourced are likely to be overlooked by social projects, which tend to focus on people facing the most acute hardship. But their having some semblance of economic stability does not negate the difficulties black single-parent women face in their parenting journey due to the interconnected working of racism, sexism, classism, and single-parentism. One difficulty more broadly experienced that a single mother might want to reflect on in a support group is the demands and stresses of expressing of balancing work, domestic tasks and caring which can affect levels of life satisfaction (see Luthar and Ciciolla 2015). This gendered experience is heightened at the intersection of family structure/gender, as a single mother takes general responsibility for it all.

A portion of participants spoke about places of worship as providing a form of social support and as beneficial in different ways. Barry, 20, had explained he did not have a kinship network beyond his mother and younger brother. For him, the church provided the family with community, a network of fictive kin. "It's nice," Barry said, "because I'm in a position now where they see how I've grown". Barry described taking up opportunities to do voluntary work within the organisation and his family enjoying the social events offered, including barbeques and sports days. For Harlem-King, attending church services while growing up helped him develop a 'good' character:

Growing up in the church helps, in terms of setting morals and knowing right from wrong – I don't go to church anymore, but I do appreciate what they taught me.

Harlem-King

Michael spoke of spending a period as a member of the Nation of Islam. He said of it: “when I look back now, it helped me understand black people’s struggle, who I am, it contextualised me.” Audrey spoke of creating a space for prayer with another female member of her church - “we believe that prayer is a strategy in itself” she said. The prayer meeting which began with the pair had grown to become a group. Establishing and maintaining a space which supports oneself and others is an act of agency. Audrey said of the group:

We noticed the need of other mothers ... there are now about 11 women in the group, and it's growing ... within that group – maybe we're not a good example, I don't know – but we're dealing with issues of prison, mental health, gangs, drugs, unemployment, we're praying over young people who have quite a lot of challenges. We're not getting the mothers, whose children are doing what they are supposed to, and everything is fine.

Audrey

The data analysed in this section offers less-seen images of the social lives of single black mother-son dyads. Their private worlds are largely unknown as they are underrepresented in the popular and academic spheres. Intersectional social constructions of race/family structure have combined stereotypes about blackness and single motherhood, making the single black mother family a signifier of pathology and dysfunction. The narratives here illuminate stories which contradict those constructions. Narrow assumptions have shaped erroneous understandings of the dyad, which includes the notion that mother and child exist in a world of their own. As Phoenix critically observes:

Mother-child dyads are observed in interaction together as if their homes were isolated from the rest of society ... [This] has a normalising effect in that it confirms that it is both right and normal for women and children to be locked up alone with each other all day.

(Phoenix 1987:52)

This data shows how mothers' and sons' worlds extended beyond their households. Most dyads benefit from a web of relationships through kinship, friendship, and spaces of community. Findings such as these demonstrate the need for counter-discourse on the intersection of blackness and

single-parent family structure, through which dyads realities and perspectives could be more fully represented. For too long, single-parent family structure has been thought about on its own; analysis of experiences at intersections such as of blackness, single-parent family structure and community might be more generative because as previously mentioned, one aspect of positioning does not “constitut[e] the whole of life” (Brah and Phoenix 2004:78).

In conclusion

This chapter examined participants' perspectives on and experiences of family structure and the single mother-son dyad. The data showed the intersectional cultural construction of single motherhood precluded participants' ability to positively identify with family structure. Deficit discourses were an omnipresent reference, responses to which ranged from internalisation to ambivalence to defence. However, collectively their narratives reveal that most participants' experiences contradicted negative assumptions about dysfunction, in detailing generally 'normative' parent-child relationships, and in revealing sons' tenacity in cases where the mother-son relationships were not strong, in mothers' parental agency in preparing their sons for racism and in positive experiences of spaces of support beyond the home.

These findings indicate this dyadic relationship does not warrant the anxieties it has generated. The lack of critical and constructive discourse espousing this is a consequence of dyads' neglected intersectional location at family structure/race/gender and shows the need for further empirical examination of their realities. The following chapter examines the narratives of a category of people that have been ignored and silenced: single-parent black women.

Chapter 6. The Performances and Labours of Mothers

This chapter centralises the voices of mothers. It analyses their perspectives on their social position as single parents and the realities of heading a family as a woman. Mothers' voices are vital to developing a fuller understanding of their gendered experiences of family structure. Intersectional representations of single black motherhood draw on essentialism of 'general blackness' and of black womanhood. These characterise single black women as "strong" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Nelson, Cardemil and Adeoye 2016; Burnett-Zeigler 2018), "superwomen" (Reynolds 1997), as well as emasculating "matriarchs" (Frazier 1938[1971]; Moynihan 1965; Sewell 2009, and critically observed by Dow 2015:20). It has been argued by Gunaratnam (2003:30) that essentialism constructs individuals within categories as having "an internal sameness", which dictates their thoughts and practices. Racist, sexist and single-parentist essentialism conceals the variety of ways of thinking, being and parenting among single black mothers. Reductive images remain cultural references in the absence of a critical and constructive thought tradition at the intersection of blackness, single-parent family structure, motherhood and young masculinity. This chapter attempts to develop and contribute new intersectional knowledge on this neglected category.

This chapter examines mothers' complex experiences constituted at the intersection of family structure, gender and class. Key themes that emerge include performance (Goffman 1959[1990]), surveillance and self-discipline (Foucault 1977) as well as gendered asymmetrical responsibility for caregiving (hooks 1984:140-146 Schwarz 1994:145-153; Lockman 2019:134-173). A recurrent theme is how the agency of women is tempered by a variety of constraints. Divided into four sections, the first section examines the notion of the 'strength' of mothers as an adaptive performance. The second section illustrates the complex realities of mothers while raising their children, as caregivers, providers and student parents. I suggest that mothers carry out demanding 'balancing acts' of these roles due to a mix of economic constraint, cultural expectations and notions of 'improvement'. In the third section, women's contradictory experience is demonstrated. I show how women's autonomy and self-determination are moderated by a gendered and excessive responsibility for child-rearing. In the final section, I critically reflect on

the lack of constructive anger in mothers' narrations, given their experiences of inequity at the intersection of single-parent family structure and womanhood.

6.1 Performing 'strength'

Socially constructed representations generated at the intersection of race, gender and class meant women did their mothering within and against the backdrop of controlling images (Collins 1991; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Dow 2015) of black motherhood. Collins suggests (1991:7, 68) that controlling images are instrumental in black women's lives in attaching to them "certain assumed qualities" which are then used to justify their oppression at race/gender/class. Controlling images, typically of oppressed groups, are more powerful than stereotypes, as they work to shape action and self-understanding. As Beauboeuf-Lafontant explains:

As representations of subordinated groups, controlling images guide behaviour toward and from these persons, constrain what is seen and believed about them, and when internalised, profoundly influence the self-perceptions of the marginalised...these generalisations do not simply emerge from erroneous thinking but are created by an oppressive order to police marginalised groups and naturalise their disempowerment.

(Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009:22)

Drawing on Foucault, Beauboeuf-Lafontant suggests (2009:22) the images work to elicit conformity, making them compliant rather than transformative subjects. The narrations of the mothers reflected the influence of the 'Strong Black Woman' controlling image (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Harris-Perry 2011:183-220; Dow 2015; Winfrey Harris 2015:89-102; Nelson, Cardemil and Adeoye 2016; Burnett-Zeigler 2018), which is very similar to that of the Black Superwoman (Reynolds 1997; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009:24-25). The controlling image of the 'Strong Black Woman' depicts invulnerability and tirelessness (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009:1); similarly, the Black Superwoman image represents strength, independence and hard work (Reynolds 1997:97). Research by Nelson and colleagues (2015:555-557) found participants characterised both of these mythical raced/gendered figures as independent, caring of others, hardworking and high achieving, overcoming adversity, and emotionally contained. Some women's narrations illustrated how social expectations of 'strength' from black women can be internalised, shaping thought and action. There was ambivalence about these images: while some mother participants recognised the trope as problematic and distorted, most described doing

'strength' "out of necessity," as has been found in previous research (Dow 2015:48; Nelson, Cardemil and Adeoye 2016:557-559).

One participant who held this view was Ann. Here extended attention is given to her perspective as she was insightful on the topic, and her comments reflected those of other participant mothers. Ann did not have time to meet me in person. Her description of her occupation was long - her activities stretched across public service, campaigning, creative work and entrepreneurship. Single, self-sufficient and active, she embodied the mythical superwoman. When I asked Ann if she thought these representations reflected the realities of black single mothers she said, "I think you have to be strong as there is no other choice". This raises the notion of 'strength' as a psycho-social imperative, that it is the social conditions which necessitate 'strength' for psychic survival, as opposed to it being an intrinsic quality. Ann went on to refer to intersectional social forces that are implicated in this:

We are usually facing double discrimination in society...misogyny and racism. We are stereotyped, labelled, appropriated and sexualised. *Ann*

Her belief that there was "no other choice" but for black women to be 'strong' is best understood in the context of the realities produced at intersections of race, family structure, class and gender. A contradiction which can occur within varied experiences of single motherhood is shown in the following quotation:

I felt strong and capable a lot but I also cried at night sometimes, felt bad and a failure, felt lonely but I applied self-care, picked myself up and got on with things and tried to uplift myself and others around me. *Ann*

There are a few important points raised by Ann's remark and it is worth taking time to highlight each of these. First, the competence and capability of single-parent women have been misrecognised as "invulnerability" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009:1). As Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009:2) notes, the strong black woman trope is partial as it works to obscure black women's suffering. Second, Ann mentioned experiencing a sense of inadequacy, "failure," despite the individual, family and community achievements discussed in her broader account. This is likely due to the narrow and limited gendered 'life scripts' (Renshaw 2010) for women, in which marriage is perceived as an achievement (see Adichie 2017:30-36). Third, self-care is mentioned as a sufficient response to gendered inequity. This idea is critiqued in journalistic writing (see *Black Mom Life* 2019; Delaney 2020). As Delaney (2020:n.p.) asserts "unless our care moves from the

self to the collective (or ideally both the self and the collective) as a society, we will continue to be unwell". The *Black Mom Life* blog (2019) highlights the need for more support for mothers; from this perspective "a village is needed...because the mental load and emotional labour of parenting is something that has always been meant for more than one person". Last, Ann's reference to picking herself up - "I just got on with it" - was a repeated refrain across most mothers' accounts. It may reflect a perceived lack of power to challenge the social order or the futility of raising grievances. This approach may have helped them to avoid considering the enormity of the task they were undertaking in raising their child or children alone and fulfilling other commitments, a type of unconscious thought process referred to as "splitting" (Klein 1946). However, this response to circumstances may have the inadvertent effect of naturalising the 'burden' borne and minimising the scale of labour undertaken by mothers at intersections of gender and family structure.

Ann's words and those of the other women on this topic indicate that any semblance of the 'Strong Black Woman' may involve performance (Goffman 1959). In Goffman's view (1959:23,9) the behaviour of social actors can be understood as performances of idealised self-presentations that allow people to claim a desired social role. In the case of single mothers, this 'desired social role' may be that of a competent sole parent and head of household. The accomplished performance of single black mothers as 'Strong Black Women' may serve to deflect what Goffman (1959:38) calls "social doubt," the scepticism and scrutiny of others. This would be logical given the claims of the inadequacy of single black mothers, which it is worth noting are based on intersectional stereotypes, combining racist, sexist, single-parentist and classist tropes. Again, in the absence of a reimagining of single black motherhood through a new constructive thought tradition, distorted intersectional social constructions of this positioning remain hegemonic.

Alice was one of the many mothers who spoke of rejecting raced/gendered tropes relating to strength because she found them harmful and limiting. The quotation below follows from Alice explaining her view that single parenting required too much of one person, and that she had therefore ensured her former partner was involved in the lives of their two children as much as possible. She outlined her position on the tropes:

I'm not singing that 'I'm a single strong black woman' song. I think it's damaging to black women. If that happens to be our situation, then so be it. But we don't need to make it into: "we can do it all because we are the mothers". It's a circumstance that we shouldn't really celebrate. I think that label has done more damage to us than good because of what it says - that we don't need anything, we don't need our needs to be met, it just means that we can meet everybody else's needs to the detriment of our own.

Alice

JJ articulated a different critical stance on controlling images. She suggested that these tropes about strength should not be racialised because single parenting is a gendered experience, reflected in the fact that 90% of parents doing this form of hidden domestic labour are women (Gingerbread 2019:n.p.) :

I understand them saying 'strong black woman' because a lot of us are single parents. But you get white ladies who are doing the same as we're doing [...] Women, period, have to be strong because if anything breaks down, 99% of the time you're left holding the family together.

JJ

In these circumstances, she speaks of women doing the "holding...together" of that which has "broken down." For her, all women in this family structure, as parents, perform a 'Strong Woman' type of role. However, the experiences of single black mothers and single white mothers arguably cannot be equated due to the additional challenges black women face because of class and race inequalities.

Some of the mothers' narrations showed they were aware of the performance element of their mothering. Goffman's conceptualisation of performance (1959) suggests people conduct themselves in highly controlled ways to shape any meanings imposed on them by observers. Having become a mother in her late teenage years, Natalie recalled switching between self-presentations as appropriate:

[B]ecause of a feeling of being judged and being watched, I felt like I couldn't put a foot wrong...There was almost a kind of schizophrenia in it in that when my mum would have my son for the weekend I would drink heavily when I was out with my friends, because I needed to feel normal and not responsible and not watched I was just another 20-year-old at that point, and I could be free. I could make mistakes and drink too much, and vomit, and wake up with a hangover and sort it all out, and go back to being a 'perfect mummy': "let's make sure you've got your 5 portions of fruit and veg for the day", and "have I packed your snacks?" and "have we read a book?" and these *checklists* that I would go through in my mind of these things I needed to curate in his life to make sure that he had everything that he needed [...] And so I'm very grateful actually that I had that opportunity from my mum to get that chance to be free because I don't know how I would have *maintained* that without those chances to have a blow-out.

Natalie

Natalie identified her self-conscious effort to perform socially-defined 'good parenting'. In our second interview, she reflected that her "blow-out" weekends were the result of "the restraint I put upon myself and the pressure". She said later in this line of conversation: "it was that I just needed a break from having to be responsible for another human". The "restraint" and "pressure" Natalie described can be seen as a form of Foucauldian self-surveillance. The concept of panopticism (Foucault 1977) is useful for illustrating how certain social actors can internalise a disciplinary gaze, preemptively self-surveilling, and conforming to avoid judgement and sanction. Foucault's analysis of the prison showed how the design of the institutional space worked to elicit the self-discipline of prisoners. The prison panopticon, a central tower from which all inmates believed they could be observed, served to establish a sense of continual surveillance. The high standards Natalie held herself to can arguably be understood in the context of the stigma (Goffman 1990[1963]; Tyler and Slater 2018) around 'young' working-class motherhood (Phoenix 1991). Stigma is intensified at intersections. As a racialised, young single mother, Natalie was positioned across numerous categories of difference: family structure, age, race, gender and class. As with intersectional subjects, stereotypes of each aspect of positioning combine to create negative meaning about her situation and personhood. Another thing in Natalie's narration that is significant is her described need for respite from responsibility "for another human". This signals that carework can be understood as an effortful activity, rather than natural behaviour (Silva 1996), labour with heavy responsibility and laden with emotional investment. This recognition was central in the Wages for Housework movement (see Dalla Costa and James 1972) which, among other

demands, called for social recognition of the value of the caring work done in domestic space (Davis 2019[1981]:209-213). Natalie's narrative implies she switched from being free-spirited to the "perfect mummy", whom she implies is sensible, disciplined and conscientious. Such narratives among accounts indicate that idealised motherhood is not just domestic tasks carried out, but also a certain way of being too.

A significant portion of the mothers described practices that could be understood as emotional labour (Hochschild 2012[1983]; Wilkinson 2018). Hochschild defined emotional labour in this way:

[The] requirement to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others – [in some cases] the sense of being cared for... (Hochschild 2012[1983]:7)

It can involve "the burden of having to put a brave face on" (Wilkinson 2018: n.p.) which can apply to the emotional work mothers do as parents. Some mothers described concealing difficult emotions, performing for the benefit of their children. Maya, 61, spoke of hiding low moods and anxiety from her three children and said she believed being more emotionally honest positively developed her relationship with her son.

I think when I became emotional, that's when my son and I connected much more. He saw that I am also vulnerable. And I think when I stopped pretending to be this *strong* Black woman... that made a stronger bond. You know that pretentious thing of 'I can take the world on'? *No*, sometimes I'm vulnerable, sometimes I'm scared... let your children know that you're in pain. Let your children know that... you can't take on everything – it gets too much. I think it even made him see that he could be vulnerable as well. *Maya*

There was some recognition among other women that their stoic self-presentation could work to confuse children, giving a misleading impression. For example, when Jazzy received a diagnosis of a terminal condition with a negative prognosis this was unsurprisingly devastating to her son, but Jazzy feels the shock may have been exacerbated by her demeanour. She said she hadn't been a "flowery mum" but "strict" and described having embraced the positively valorised image of mothering similar to the tropes discussed above: "I just wanted to be supermum, superwoman." Reflecting on her son's reaction to her diagnosis she said: "I think a part of him had to say, "My mum's not invincible!" Sparrow, 54, experienced this tension slightly differently:

I mean your children don't really see what's going on with *you* as a parent. You know, you have your issues and you've still got to care for them, provide for them, and I think there's an expectation from them – which you know, is right but – I think as they get older, they don't realise that I'm not just their mum – I'm a person as well. I have my needs and sometimes those needs aren't met. ... It's like their expectations, wishes and wants come first [*pause*] and you've always got to take the back seat. *Sparrow*

Sparrow's words highlight a few things experienced by some of the other mothers in the sample: first, not feeling fully seen by her children; second, the sense she had of the necessity to keep on caring and providing, despite any internal struggles; third, her "needs" going unmet, and fourth, a sense that her children were viewed as more important than her. Such emotions can arguably be viewed as the hidden wounds of mothering. I want to suggest that type of experience is essentially a form of gender violence. Sparrow's remarks raise an important question: for single-parent women does it feel like a viable option to prioritise oneself? The sense of surveillance (Foucault 1977) and social doubt (Goffman 1959) around this category of mothers mean for many it is unlikely.

The above narratives provide rich insight into the under- and misrepresented experience of single parenthood at the intersection of family structure, race and gender. This positioning has been distorted through reductive cultural imagery which essentialises single-parent black women. The narrations of participant mothers indicate that the 'Strong Black Woman' is a performance (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009) elicited by inequitable social arrangements (Reynolds 1997). In the context of mothers' gendered excessive responsibility for children (hooks 1984:140-146; Hochschild 2012[1989]; Black Mom Life 2019; Lockman 2019; Lewis 2019), mothers likely had a sense that the everyday accomplishment of family life rested on a performance. There is arguably an absence of viable alternative cultural images for black mothers. Due to unequal distributions of power, black people living in Western societies have generally not had the ability to institute counter-representations. As well as an absence of more human images of this category of mothers, there also remains an absence of resistant and constructive thought on their situations, which could facilitate positive self-valuation and empowered self-definition. Mothers' accounts show the importance of a thought tradition at the intersection of single-parent family structure, womanhood and blackness which engages with their experiences and makes ameliorative claims for change.

6.2 Balancing acts

This section analyses women's narratives on role duplicity, and the balancing of roles as provider and caregiver. All of the 11 mothers had decided to try to balance providing and caregiving. Black mothers' tendency to attempt to balance work and family has been analysed by scholars (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]; Reynolds 2005:99-103; Dow 2016). Participant mothers spoke of their motivations for working. Theresa said she had "hated" putting her son in nursery when he was aged eight months so that she could return to work, describing it as "the hardest thing that I had to do". But for her it was necessary:

I was earning my money, and with my money I could buy him nice clothes, I got a nice little flat, and that's why I did it. I did it for him. And myself, because I enjoyed working... [for] the independence it gave you, not being dependent on anyone for anything. And knowing my money was constant.

Theresa

For Theresa, balancing work and family was key to her self-reliance. Underpinning her narrative is a desire for autonomy, a theme which was common across accounts. Research with black mothers of African heritage has found that the economic activity of mothers is generally a cultural expectation (Reynolds 2005:99-103; Dow 2016). Reynolds found in her research with Caribbean-heritage mothers that providing was perceived as intrinsic to good mothering (2005:99-103). Similarly, Dow's research (2016) with African American mothers found these women made culturally-influenced decisions about work and family which departed from motherhood and family ideology. This difference has generated judgement (see Patterson 1965: 296) and blame; Black mothers' participation in the labour market has been causally associated with deviance among Black British young people (as discussed by Lawrence 1982a:78; Gilroy 1982:48-49; for examples see Scarman 1981:25; Swann 1985; Gayle 2018).

Single-parent women's economic activity is arguably best understood in the context of black cultural norms (Collins 1987; Reynolds 2005; Dow 2016) as well as a socio-economic constraint (Phoenix 1997). Scholars note that young black women are raised with the expectation of working (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]; Collins 1987:5; Dow 2016) and grow up observing the economic agency of female elders (Reynolds 2005:100). As a research participant and mother, Michele, told Reynolds:

I have always worked and will continue to do so because my mother worked and my grandmother worked and my foremothers before that, so I don't see why I should be any different...the Caribbean women that I know, their mothers and even their grandmothers have also worked.

(Michele, Mother and research participant quoted in Reynolds 2005:100)

It could be said that for many black women work is critical to survival; as Ann Phoenix observes: "the passivity and weakness that is meant to elicit a powerful male's protection is redundant for black women (and white working-class women) whose fathers and male peers do not occupy positions of power" (Phoenix 1997:65).

The socio-historic context is important to black women's relationship to work. Most mother participants were second-generation British, the children of migrants from the Caribbean. Some of these families struggled to establish themselves materially in the country (see Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018 [1985]; Gilroy 2011[2007]). For example, Natalie spoke of her grandparents experiencing downward mobility after migrating. In their reflections on balancing work and family, a couple of the mothers referred to the economic constraint they experienced while growing up, indicating a desire to create more comfortable conditions for their children:

I wanted my son to have a good life. My mum raised us. She worked all hours but she didn't earn a lot of money. We used to make our clothes ourselves... I used to wash clothes by hand in the bath... So, we grew up quite hard. *Theresa*

[T]here were times we had to have cornmeal and porridge for dinner. That type of poverty, I appreciate and all that, but I didn't want that for any offspring that I'd have.

Jazzy

Women's commitment to balancing work and caring sometimes resulted in difficult situations as has been previously documented (Kalil *et al.* 2000; Rabindrakumar 2018). Two examples include Sparrow's story. An intensive period of study followed by a demanding work role led to her burnout. Sparrow's experience signals that there may be hidden casualties among single mothers affected by overwork. Another was a dilemma experienced by Jazzy. Jazzy described leaving her two-year-old son at home alone after childcare arrangements with her mother fell through:

I left all the toys around in a circle... and he was sitting there, I said, "Mummy is coming, don't move." And he'd stay there - he was fed and everything. I lived here, and the

workplace was just there. And I always remember hearing ambulances and thinking, "Please, God don't let it be him..." I'd be wondering what time it was, I wanted to get home. I'd get in, he'd be where I left him laughing in front of the telly. *Jazzy*

Jazzy said she repeatedly went back and forth between her nearby workplace and home to check on her son. "I had no choice because I wanted us to better ourselves," she said. Jazzy explained that for her living on benefits would have "felt like giving up"; she said she wanted her son to grow up feeling proud of her and had wanted to "prove" she could make it on her own. Her narration highlighted an important theme that emerged across mothers' accounts: that being economically self-reliant (Dow 2016) increases mothers' self-efficacy (Jackson and Scheines 2003), self-esteem and sense of accomplishment (Kalil *et al.* 2000). Finally, due to the negative meanings attached to single mothers, the "social doubt" (Goffman 1959:38) that exists around particular single-parent women, mothers often feel the need to 'prove' their capability in the role. The intersectional positioning of these mothers at family structure, gender, class and race meant their experiences were typically shaped by socio-economic constraints as well as cultural expectations. The result was a commitment to performing delicate balancing acts, being a provider as well as the main carer. This finding supports those of previous work (see Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]; Reynolds 2005; Dow 2016), signalling the pervasiveness of self-reliance ideology (Dow 2016).

For some mothers, the balanced commitments also included studying as student parents. The majority of the mothers in the sample, eight of the 11 women, were at some point student parents who studied for degree qualifications while raising their children (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1981]:82-86; Haleman 2004; NUS 2009; Lashley 2014; Sela 2015; Greenberg and Sheenar-Golan 2018). For the mothers, this was a strategic decision to increase or stabilise earnings, as previous studies have found (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1981]; Lashley 2014). The following quotation from Juliet illustrates this:

I always knew there would be a ceiling [of income] that might not be able to go over, so it was a way of staying off benefits: doing my degree and getting educated and getting what's considered 'a good job' to be able to afford my family. *Juliet*

Two of the mothers, Natalie, 35, and Audrey, 47, had become expectant mothers while students. They described continuing on their academic trajectories after short interruptions. Natalie described how a loophole in criteria meant she was ineligible for student funding. Living in a flat

with her small son, she funded herself through undergraduate and postgraduate studies working three casual jobs to meet financial commitments.

There were parts of some mothers' narrations which indicated that their "educational desire" (Mirza 2018a) may have been linked to a notion of "improvement" (Skeggs 1997:82-93), in order to distance and differentiate themselves from negative representations of single motherhood. Such distancing by mothers in stigmatised categories is a practice observed in other research (Dow 2015; Banister *et al.* 2016; Morris and Munt 2019). Recall Audrey's comments in Chapter 5 about not wanting to be associated with dominant, stigmatised representations of single mothers. Some mothers expressed similar thoughts to those, including Juliet: "I think the focus becomes 'What can I do so my kids don't lose out and become a statistic?'" Similarly, Natalie recalled how she felt about continuing studying as a sole parent to her very young small son: "in the back of my mind, I was actually a failure, so there was that fear, that desire to prove people wrong". It seemed to be fears about who they *didn't* want to be that motivated mothers. Demanding routines to balance childrearing, working and studying were described:

I studied at night. We'd all go to bed at the same time and then I would get up at 1 am and I'd start my studies. *Sparrow*

I think being on my own gave me that motivation and that determination to study two nights a week... sometimes I'd be up all night finishing an assignment. I'd send it off, then wake him up, get him ready for school, drop him off and then go to work... at the time I just didn't think about it. When I look back now, I think, 'How did I do that?'

Margaret

JJ described balancing the single parenting of her two children, with night work and studying for a second bachelor's degree. She said of this time:

You do this and you think you're a soldier, and you carry on, but I kept on getting tonsillitis... And you think to yourself, 'What can you do? You got to do your studies. The kids need sorting out. You've got to do it!' *JJ*

Mothers' agency in making use of educational opportunity is part of a broader pattern among black women doing so in the UK and US (Lashley 2014; Mirza 2018; Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1981]), using education to resist raced/gendered marginalisation. This was documented in

the innovative and ground-breaking study on black women in Britain by Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe in which they asserted:

Returning to study has not been easy but the large number of Black women of all ages who have chosen to do so attests to the fact that we are still refusing to be deterred by our lack of qualifications, the demands of our families and other pressures.

(Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018:82)

The sociologist Heidi Mirza (2018a) has asserted that black women are driven by “educational urgency” in their desire to use academic qualifications to succeed against the odds. Single-parent women are associated with benefit dependency, and inaccurately so, as most single mothers are in work and also a far more complicated issue than represented (Rabindrakumar 2018). As mentioned, single-parent black women are more likely to work and this research account shows they also study. The agency and tenacity of single mothers have been denied. This is one finding which strongly indicates that family structure is not the negative life determinant claimed, as women take action to gain a sense of control over their lives.

It is important to reiterate here that mothers rarely manage the balance of their commitments and responsibilities alone. One fitting analogy is their performative 'balance' is achieved in a joint effort with a cast of supporting actors, a team (Goffman 1959), as discussed previously. This included relatives, fictive kin, including other mothers, practitioners such as childcare workers and sometimes non-resident fathers. The importance of social support for single-mother households has long been reiterated (Boyd-Franklin 1989; Randolph 1995). Indeed, these hidden figures played important roles in the everyday lives of mothers and children, contributing toward the accomplishment of family life.

As Patricia Hill Collins (1987:4) has asserted, the Western practice of defining family by household membership overlooks other important relationships. While the African proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child' was reflected in some women's narratives of family, not all of the mother participants enjoyed such support. The psychological effects on those who lacked support varied. Audrey, a single mother of three, didn't have relatives in London. She said she didn't feel able to ask for or accept help, and spoke of experiencing low moments. Jazzy, a mother of one, didn't have relatives or friends she could count on and described a time when she couldn't continue caring for her son:

There was a time when I couldn't cope. I kind of cried out for someone to just help because it was just getting a bit much...[Son] went through a little blip...I just wanted a little bit of help, even for a few hours just to breathe, but I didn't get that. So, I just had to find another way: he was looked after temporarily... I was reaching out and no one would help, so I had to do that.

Jazzy

This part of Jazzy's account begs the question of where a caregiver can turn when their energy is spent or they are in distress. What structures of support are available? It illuminates the risks of isolated private households (Barrett and McIntosh 2015[1982]; Lewis 2019:115-124) when people are disadvantaged by weak social and family ties. Such experiences underscore the importance not just of social support but the collective care of adults (Delaney 2020) as well as children (McIntosh and Barrett 2015[1982]; hooks 1984:140-146; Lewis 2019:149-153) for mothers' quality of life (Luthar and Ciciolla 2015).

The above analysis of participant mothers who were located at race, family structure, gender and class has illuminated their role multiplicity as caregivers, workers and students. This demanded a lot from mothers. Participants' accounts suggest this was motivated not only by cultural expectations but also by socioeconomic constraints, and an attendant desire for a sense of control over their lives. Intersectional social constructions, or racist and classist single parentism, also appeared to have an effect, as mothers sought to distance and differentiate themselves from bleak cultural representations of single black motherhood. This raises the question of how mothers' experiences might improve if they enjoyed more public support instead of being subject to reductive stereotypes. Such a reality may only come about following the establishment of a resistant and constructive thought tradition, an 'anti-single-parentism' which engages with experiences at the intersection of blackness and single-parent family structure.

6.3 The gains and 'costs' of liberation

In this section, I examine the ways single motherhood shaped the lives of women. Most of the women became single parents having ended unhappy relationships (see Firestone 1988[1970]; Jarrett 1994:36-38; hooks 2000:164-188; Cosslett 2019). Contradictorily, being liberated in some ways, also meant becoming constrained in others. Mothers' narrations detailed experiences of emergent autonomy but also excessive responsibility for children; career achievement but also sole responsibility for running a household. For some women, this included bearing the full economic weight of raising children as the sole household provider, and the compartmentalising

of sexuality, in prioritising children. The way society is organised according to gender meant these women became the "default parent" (Lockman 2019:134-173), which involved bearing a significant mental load (Emma 2017a, 2017b) and performing intensive labour (Hays 1996; Capellini *et al.* 2019).

Most of the mothers had become single parents following the end of a long-term relationship. One woman ended her engagement, realising she was unable to be herself with her partner; one mother described fleeing a marriage that became abusive, and another mother decided to leave a confusing on-off relationship that had continued for several years. During interviews, many women spoke of "relief" about this life change. However, the gendered nature of social organisation, specifically the gendering of the domestic sphere (Dalla Costa and James 1971; Davis 2019[1981]:200-220; Hochschild 2012[1989]) and specifically of childrearing labour (hooks 1984:140-146 Schwarz 1994:145-153; Lockman 2019:134-173) meant women then faced the challenge of asymmetrical – if not sole – responsibility for their child/ren. This excessive burden on women also occurs within the idealised heteronormative nuclear family but I argue that it is heightened in single mother family structure, where the other parent is not an intrinsic part of everyday life. The following quotation from Natalie, who re-partnered after ten years of single mothering, demonstrates this regarding decision-making processes:

I think having experienced being a single parent and parenting as a couple, I see the benefits in that you don't have to compromise on how you want to parent, you just get on with how you want to do things, and you don't have to negotiate with anybody. But there is the fact that there is nobody to ask "What do you think?" and just to take some of that pressure off, because as a single parent it's just you and you've always got to make the right call.

Natalie

This quotation illustrates one of the contradictions of single mothers' experiences, being autonomous but with the "pressure" of childrearing responsibility. The "pressure" mothers experience has been conceptualised as the mental load (see Emma 2017b:8). The concept generally refers to a pattern in heterosexual relationships of mothers holding the responsibility of thinking of and managing everything relating to children – from meals and schooling to appointments and parties. This "invisible," constant stream of thought is "exhausting" (Emma 2017b:8-9) and can affect mothers' well-being (Luthar and Ciciolla 2015). Audrey, described the demands on her as she adjusted to life as a newly single parent:

[A]ll three of them had their issues. the eldest one had real issues transitioning from primary school going on to secondary school... I think my son had issues at school all the way through so there was that, and then I had a baby at the time... *Audrey*

Even when fathers were involved in their children's lives, there was recognition that they, as mothers, held ultimate responsibility for the accomplishment of caring each day as well as emergencies of different kinds. Jazzy recounted when her son Joseph, who has epilepsy, had a fit during an overnight stay with his father. Jazzy felt she had no choice but to collect Joseph after his father telephoned in a panic. Not dissimilarly, the father of Margaret's son saw him frequently, but Margaret described feeling responsible for childcare during school breaks:

So initially the arrangement with his dad was that we would alternate the school holidays and then the summer, I think we said would split, but that didn't always work out and it was always me that was having to be the one that would sort out arrangements. *Margaret*

At another point in our interview Margaret reflected further on the imbalance of labour:

[His Dad] didn't really get involved in things that he did. You know a lot of the time it was just me going to parents' evenings on my own, getting involved in his activities and taking him on holiday, that's something that he didn't do... a lot of the time he probably would have Jay, but not really be doing anything with him for that time. *Margaret*

The innovative feminist comic by the political illustrator known as Emma, *You Should've Asked* (2017a, 2017b), details how such imbalances occur in heterosexual couples. 'You should have asked' refers to the notion that heterosexual male partners perform domestic tasks only when requested, while in contrast, the mind of a heterosexual mother is full of what needs to be done and organised. As non-resident fathers are less available, this may exacerbate single mothers' mental load. The similarities and differences in the experiences of mothers in different family forms are under-theorised. To examine the mental load of mothers at the intersection of single-mother family structure would be illuminating, as would an examination of mothers' mental load at the intersection of race.

As discussed in Chapter 5, and further developed in Chapter 8, a large portion of the mothers remarked on racism as impacting the experience of parenting. This issue is analysed in the

literature (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]; Reynolds 2005:74-96; Chapman and Bhopal 2013; Rollock *et al.* 2015) with a consensus that the experience of raising a black son in societies structured by race is challenging and complex (see Lorde 1984[2007]:72-80; Golden 1995; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003:235-258; Elliot and Reid 2016; Ward 2018). Alice reflected upon this in her narrative:

I think especially as black mums, we parent out of fear because we've got things coming up from all corners ... So if you're the sole carer, that's a pressure. The school is telling you something about your son, that's a pressure. The media, society and all [this commenting] about black boys, that's a pressure. So we parent from a position of fear rather than a position of nurturing and love.

Alice

Alice describes how the social conditions influenced the nature of her internal experience of parenting her son. At the intersection of race, family structure and gender, participant mothers spoke of their concerns and responses to the complex and distinctive threats to their sons (Angelou 2008[1981]:101-102; Solanke 2014; Brooks and Hattenstone; Akala 2018; Travis 2019). Single black mothers of black sons bear the weight of this everyday concern alone. This is an additional and differential yet largely hidden, or 'erased' dimension of mothering in the black single mother-son dyad, and a finding that this study contributes to British academic literature. I suggest it also makes a case for a resistant knowledge tradition at the intersection of single-parent family structure and blackness.

Such hidden realities of mothers in dyads have been documented and explored in cultural works to a greater degree. Examples include the play *Pandora's box* (Solanke 2012), in which a British Nigerian mother struggles with a decision on whether to send her streetwise teenage son away from the complicated challenges of London to boarding school in Nigeria. The writer and poet Maya Angelou reflected on her experience of the single mother-son dyad throughout a number of her ground-breaking biographies (2008[1976]; 2008[1986]; 2008[1987]; 2008[2002]), showing how the racial landscape of America impacted her son's experience of youth and her experience of motherhood. Similarly, and in the North context, writer Golden reflected on similar challenges in *Saving our Sons* (1995). Such offerings which also elucidate on women's attempts to live with stability in the context of multitudinous inequalities disrupt the silence around single black mothering. This study aims to do the same.

Mothers' narratives showed that some of the women appeared to uphold the ideology of intensive mothering (Hays 1996; Elliott, Brenton and Powell 2015; Capellini *et al.* 2019), despite the additional challenges they faced. Elliott, Powell and Brenton define intensive mothering as “the belief that good mothers should first and foremost be caregivers and should invest great swaths of time, money, energy, and emotional labour in intensively raising children” (2015:532). The following quotation from Alice illustrates elements of this perspective:

I used to sit up and do all their projects with them. And during those times I was working full-time, I was *tired*. I would collect every manner of things, the egg boxes and everything ...you have to be engaged...you cannot use the excuse of “We have to work!” Because what’s more important? You have to arrange things on a hierarchy...everyone's needs have to be met, but sometimes, as the parent, our needs have to be put on the back burner.

Alice

Alice suggests that children should be prioritised above a mother’s needs. The majority of the mothers described supporting school work and organising extra-curricular activities for their children. This aspect of parenting required more of women’s time, energy and finances. Listing the various activities her son Jay was involved in during childhood, Margaret recalled: “...it was nearly every evening there was something different and I’d be like a taxi service, taking him here, taking him there...” Mothers followed the dominant, pervasive mothering ideology, despite the personal cost. Cappellini and colleagues use Foucault’s concept of subjectification to explain mothers’ internalisation of certain ideals; for them, individuals become uncritically bound by guiding principles and orient their actions accordingly (2019:479). While what mothers describe above may be viewed negatively from a feminist point of view, mothers’ commitments to and investments in their children are probably best understood in the context of inequalities, and the historical unequal outcomes of black young people in the UK (Mullen and Clinks 2014; Kulz 2015). I must state that there is a tension here, in that it is important to underline that the mothers in the research sample were typically conscientious and dedicated parents because black women have been characterised as 'bad' mothers (as discussed by Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]; Collins 1991:70-78; Reynolds 2005:28-33). Equally, there is also the need to state explicitly that their parental responsibility was oppressive. It is the result of a gendered inequity between single mothers and non-resident fathers, as well as of social organisation that ascribes the responsibility of caregiving to individuals, usually women, rather than collective communities (see McIntosh and Barrett 2015[1982]:47-53; hooks 1984:140-146; Lewis 2019:149-153). Again, intersectional representations of single black mothers have been constituted of negative tropes about

blackness, womanhood, and single parenthood, which have worked to pathologise this category. Participant mothers' accounts indicate the epistemic injustice of these, due to their misrepresentation.

One advantage of being autonomous heads of a household was being liberated from the power asymmetry that typically patterns heterosexual relationships (Firestone 1988[1970]:121-138; Schwarz 1994; hooks 2000:164- 188; Adichie 2017). One pattern across accounts was that most of the mothers were able to exercise self-determination, and one expression of this was building rewarding careers. The majority of the mothers in the sample took on professional roles, from educators and social workers to business owners. Most of these mothers developed these careers following time spent at university as student mothers (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1981]:82-86; Haleman 2004; NUS 2009; Lashley 2014; Sela 2015; Greenberg and Sheenar-Golan 2018). This action facilitated their access to rewarding work that enabled them to be effective household providers. From the women's accounts, earning a family wage and flexible working were usually paramount in their choice of career. But a large portion of the mothers also intentionally chose roles that had a social justice element. The following part of Natalie's narrative details this:

I went into teaching because I saw how different experiences were between my brother and myself in education, and how you can completely crush a person if they don't have teachers who understand the value of education. And then I had a little black boy in front of me and it terrified me as to what the education system was going to do to him. And I always try to be a person of integrity and of my word and rather than sitting there moaning I was going to have to do something, and so I became a teacher. And I thought, as a single parent, I may now be able to get all the holidays with my son and that was going to be great. I didn't quite realise how all-consuming teaching was going to be, how attached to other people's children I became and the need to heal the community through education and give people opportunities. I taught in Tottenham for seven years then in Hackney for five, and a year in Leyton and I saw the impact of education, what a good education does for children, and what [being taught by] people who look like them does for them because you then decolonise it. Education's been for white people, for bright people, for rich people but it's for all of us.

Natalie

It is important to detail the social action of these women, under recognised at the societal level. Examples include Juliet, also a teacher, who as part of her role at a secondary school for boys ran sessions for students on police stop and search in response to their experiences locally; Ann, who did campaigning work as her day job and also ran an activist organisation, and JJ, a social worker, who worked with struggling parents and young people in care. In challenging inequalities through their work, these women were active agents. Some mothers also contributed their time to support their communities; Margaret did volunteer work with a black charity which ran activities for young people, while Theresa was a councillor representing the concerns and needs of residents on her estate at the town hall. It is important to emphasise that these mothers are not unusual – their social action reflects a long history of activism and resistance among black women Londoners (see Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1981]; Elliot-Cooper 2019). In challenging raced/gendered/classed marginalisation mothers demonstrated critical consciousness (hooks 2003:80-93). This finding demonstrates the diversity among single black mothers, as well as how their individual lives are multidimensional, which racist single-parentism has denied.

As mothers attained professional positions, their earnings increased. Recalling this, Juliet, who had previously been a clerical worker, said:

[A]fter doing my degree and then training and becoming a teacher, my salary literally doubled. I was able to say, 'Okay, I can do this'. *Juliet*

As parenthood tends to affect women's incomes adversely (Covert 2017; Harkness 2018), this was an achievement of the mothers. However, it must also be acknowledged that this micro triumph occurred within the bounds of structural inequality. As women were heads of household in England's capital, one of the world's most expensive cities (EIU 2019, cited by Corbishley 2019), their rise in earnings was tempered by expenditure on the household budget, for which they were solely responsible. The circumstances of single mothers meant a positive material change in did not absolve them of financial pressures. Across mothers' accounts, money was usually discussed as a critical factor. Ann, one of the few mothers who managed to purchase a home, said:

I'm good at managing finances and on a budget. I know how to do things economically and still make things fun on a budget for a child; I grew up poor as many of us did. *Ann*

Despite education and career achievements mothers were still unable to disregard money and many spoke of practising financial self-discipline (Cappellini *et al.* 2019) and making sacrifices for the benefit of their children. This was another 'cost' of liberation, as the following quotation illustrates:

I think income-wise I sacrificed what I earned for him. Generally, it was just *Joseph, Joseph, Joseph*. 'Joseph needs this', 'Joseph needs uniform', 'Joseph needs that', 'he needs shoes'. It was just solely food, shoes, and little activities. That was my core thing to do. Jazzy

Even when fathers remained connected to families, their financial contributions varied; some non-resident fathers were dependable in their monetary support of their children, others didn't contribute at all and some did so minimally. As heads of households responsible for most if not all expenditures, women experienced an exclusive 'cost'. These narratives show that women face possibly life-changing financial consequences for the end of a relationship that has produced children. In the following quotation JJ reflects on this, seemingly in an attempt to rationalise things:

If I think about it [*pause*] I could have had an art collection in my house, but you know what, my focus was on the kids. As long as they had everything they wanted, and I had invested in what they needed to become productive citizens... I don't own my own house, I don't have an art collection and stuff like that, but at the same time, I think my kids have done alright. So, they're my art collection [*laughs*]. JJ

Finally, another impact of single motherhood on women was the relegation of sexuality and couple relationships. A significant portion of the mothers interviewed did not re-partner while raising their children. Interestingly this seems to reflect a wider pattern at the intersection of family structure, gender and race. Research shows that this family form is typically transient for households, as mothers generally re-partner within five years on average (Skew 2009) and that the dating activity of single parents is usually not affected by having small children (Gray *et al.* 2015). However, a study on African American single mothers of sons (Wilson 2013) found that some mothers either abstained from dating or were discrete when doing so. For reasons which need unpacking, the experience seems to be different for single-parent black women.

Ann spoke of either dating when her son was with his father and at times choosing to forego couple relationships altogether:

I made a conscious choice through my sons' secondary school years not to be in a relationship in order to ensure stability. I was conscious that this was an important period both in terms of hormones and education. *Ann*

Similarly, reflecting on how she deferred a romantic life, Jazzy explained her view of single parenting: "you need to put in time. It's like a job, a full-time job." Similar to the findings of Wilson, some mothers felt unable to integrate this aspect of their personhood into single mothering. Theresa was unique in rejecting this approach – she had spoken of cohabiting with a partner for 15 years throughout her son's childhood. When I described to her the perspectives of the mother participants in Wilson's study, she seemed surprised:

[W]hy are you shielding that child from life? ...In denying yourself a relationship because you've got a child, that's not life, that's creating an artificial world. No, I think you have to live your life, and that the person you bring in has to understand you've got your child and you'll always put your child before them in lots of respects. *Theresa*

Feeling a need to exercise sexual self-discipline was another way that mothers experienced constraint.

Mother's narratives analysed in this section demonstrate the complicated nature of single motherhood. For many women, it encompassed autonomy and achievement but also constraint and sacrifice. It could be said that positioning at axes of race, family structure, class, and gender, generates multidimensional experiences of single motherhood, variously encompassing distinctive and additional forms of mental load, career achievements, excessive responsibility, community action and financial constraint. These varied experiences are largely invisible at the societal level and contrast with dominant, reductive representations of single black motherhood. Again, this demonstrates the need for a resistant knowledge tradition at the intersection of single-parent family structure, womanhood and blackness.

6.4 The inconspicuous absence of anger

Lastly in this chapter, one thing surprising about the narrations of participant mothers was a general lack of constructive anger. It has been convincingly asserted (Lorde 2007 [1984]; Merritt *et al.* 2012; Ashley 2014) that for black women anger is the appropriate response to the socio-political issues they face. For single-parent black women, such issues include misrepresentation

(Lawrence 1982a; Collins 1991:70-78; Dickerson 1995a; Song and Edwards 1997; Reynolds 1997; Reynolds 2010; Dow 2015); the gendered inequity of parental responsibility (Clark 1970; hooks 1984:140-146); the additional demands on black mothers in protecting children from racism (Golden 1995; Lorde 2007[1984]:74; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003:235-258; Rollock 2014; Rollock *et al.* 2015) and the realisation of the inability protect one's child completely (Lawrence 2007; Elliot and Reid 2016; Ward 2018).

Anger was conspicuous in its absence. It has been suggested that the silences in people's narratives might be as important as what they do share (Hollway and Jefferson 2007[2000]:1-2). What women did share about their perception of being a single mother role was that it had been "hard" (a few of the women), "...the most tiring thing I've ever done. The most emotionally wrought thing I've ever done..." (one mother) and even "damn difficult" (one mother). It could be argued that this was radical in itself – it is potentially shameful to complain about single motherhood (Mártir 2014). As Mártir observes (2014:n.p.): "we can't say it's hard. We can't cry over the pressure. We are supposed to grin and bear it".

The silence around anger could have been an attempt to distance from the Angry Black Woman trope (Wallace 1979: 91; Harris-Perry 2011; Winfrey-Harris 2015:75- 88), another intersectional representation of race/gender, that has been used to discredit black women. It was in poring over the words of mothers over time that it occurred to me that there was much in their experiences to be angry about. There were some glimpses of it. Alice said about her relationship with her son: "It was not a linear relationship because I'll tell you that sometimes I couldn't stand him. And sometimes he couldn't stand me..." And at the end of one interview, in response to my question "is there anything you'd like to add?", one mother revealed: "in another life, I wouldn't have children... I would focus on myself". Some of the mothers, including Alice and Natalie, 35, did describe frustrations about what the social conditions meant for their son. Largely though, there was silence about what gender inequity within single mother family structure had meant for them. A critical and constructive knowledge tradition focused on the intersection of single-parent family structure and womanhood would develop terminology for reflection on this.

Perhaps anger was seen as an emotion too threatening. In her ground-breaking, influential writings Audre Lorde articulated the potential uses of anger and cautioned against silence. For her, anger is not an emotion that should be shirked because it is "loaded with information" (2007:128):

[It is] potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being... focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy, serving progress and change. (Lorde 2007:127)

Lorde argued that change is the potential achievement of “anger between peers,” harmful only when it remained “unspoken” (2007:131). For Lorde, leaving what we wish to say unspoken is futile: “the machine will grind you into the dust anyway, whether or not we speak” (2007:42). Scholars have drawn on relevant parts of their biographies in the discussion of the topics they study (for example see Reynolds 1997:106; Back 2007:158-159; Gabriel and Tate 2017; Reay 2017:1-10; Arday 2019). Guided by these examples and taking my cue from Lorde, I shall do so here. For fourteen years I have been a single parent, raising a son who is racialised as black in England. The situation has generated anger; first, because I have come to realise that I am unable to completely protect my son from racism; second, due to family structure-difference, we are generally not seen as a ‘real’ family, and third, because I have borne excessive responsibility for raising my child, due to gender inequity which is regarded standard due gendered norms.

Thinking about the gendered asymmetry of responsibility, Clark's powerful essay which documented and reflected on her experience of single motherhood in 1970 is still relevant. "As mothers, we are worse off than we think we are", she asserts (1970:86). She recalls an incident at court when she suggests her two young children are cared for by their father. She is accused of desertion and a member of staff threatens to call the police (1970:79-80). She also notes at the time the generous support available to single fathers and to foster parents. "Where is the equity?" she asks (1970:83-84).

In conclusion

This chapter demonstrates the complicated nature of participants' experiences at the neglected intersection of single-parent family structure, blackness, and motherhood. Participants' narratives reveal the contradictory nature of mothers' realities: an enjoyment of autonomy, self-efficacy and achievement as students and workers, tempered by a need to practice various forms of self-discipline as providers and heads of household. Mothers' commitment to earning was shaped by varying combinations of cultural and economic influences: cultural expectations of women's economic self-reliance, economic constraint due to family histories of migration and one-parent family status, and again, negative intersectional cultural imagery about single mothers.

Their role multiplicity as the provider and main caregiver and sometimes student, in addition, meant the experience of constraint and the necessity of self-discipline. All mothers experienced excessive caring responsibility, a phenomenon generally viewed as unremarkable due to gender inequality and the gendered division of labour.

The findings show that the various realities of single-parent black women face are more complicated and diverse than representations and discourse suggest. Moreover, findings show that there are both problematic and positive aspects of single motherhood for women. As such experiences are typically lived at overlooked points of the intersection, there is a need for a critical and constructive knowledge project at the intersection of single-parent family structure, motherhood and blackness to examine, theorise and politicise such experiences.

Chapter 7. The Relationships and Subjectivities of Sons

This chapter focuses on sons' reflections on their emergence into manhood. It examines their relationships, their perspectives, and their identities to try to understand their varying experiences at the intersection of race, family structure, gender and age. As mentioned previously, the notion that 'father absence' has a detrimental impact on sons has long dominated discussion (Patterson 1965; Moynihan 1965; Murray 1990; Sewell 2009; Lammy 2011; Sewell 2009, 2010, 2018, 2019). One of the main assumptions about male children raised by single-parent women is that they will not be socialised into socially acceptable forms of masculinity (see Murray 1990:22; Phillips 2011 n.p.; Lammy 2011:120). One view is that the challenges created by racism make the role of fathers even more critical (Harker 2019:95). To address this social action has included increasing the visibility of black male role models (see Department for Communities and Local Government 2007; Khan *et al.* 2017:60) and a proliferation of mentoring schemes (discussed critically by Odih 2002; Reynolds 2010; Gilroy 2013b; Tarrant *et al.* 2015; Matthews 2018). These actions are based on a widely-held belief that guidance from adult males is an urgent need for boys in single-mother households. However, this claim has not been substantiated by research evidence (Tarrant *et al.* 2015:61) but is based on gendered assumptions. The regulation of young black males through these mentoring projects may inadvertently convey an impression that black boys are in some way inadequate (Odih 2002:94,93; Gilroy 2013b:33). This action also subtly undermines single mothers. As Reynolds observes (2010 n.p.): "a disturbing trend with these programmes is their causal attempt to link explanations of educational outcomes for boys to particular ideas about what the 'right' types of family and parenting are". Scholars have observed that some mentoring projects (Odih 2002) and urban schools (Kulz 2014a, 2014b) view themselves as filling a 'void' within certain families:

The role of the mother is not explored but the underlying theme is that she, as a single parent, would be unable to induct him into the subtleties of the world of adult men, which remain available only to the 'old heads'. (Philip 2000, quoted in Odih 2002:95)

This chapter critically engages with these assumptions and focuses on sons' experiences of and perspectives on family structure, including what relationships were important to them and if or how their needs were met. A key theme throughout is sons' critical consciousness and use of agency. Some of the ways this occurs are in sons' identification of appropriate role models, if any, (Tarrant *et al.* 2015), in negotiating and resisting limiting ideas of raced/gendered identity (Bola 2019a, 2019b), as well as in judgement making about fathers and the processing of related emotions (Nixon, Greene and Hogan 2012). Divided into four sections, the first part of the chapter examines various experiences of non-resident fathers. The second section focuses on the oft-overlooked roles of other male kin in sons' lives. The third section builds on this in its analysis of sons' views on male role model discourse. The final section analyses themes in sons' reflections on their identities and the spaces in which some have found social and emotional support.

7.1 The spectrum of non-resident fathering

To critically engage with narratives about black single-mother households, it is important to document sons' narratives about separated father and son relationships, specifically, the ways sons perceive and respond to these circumstances. In focusing on these relationships from the perspective of sons, this analysis examines an under-researched and under-theorised experience at the intersection of family structure, 'race', and gender.

Most participant sons had a relationship with their non-resident father while growing up. Of the 16 single-mother families represented by mother and/or son participants, 11 described some form of an ongoing relationship. Discourse about and popular representations of black non-resident fathers frequently depict them as absent, a presumption scholars and writers have long argued against (Mott 1990; Jarrett 1994; Randolph 1995; Reynolds 2005, 2009, 2010; Lee 2013a, 2013b; Ide *et al.* 2018). Participants' accounts revealed the range and the complexity of relationships. The sons' experiences of fathering were fluid and shifting, due to changing circumstances and relationships. The types of non-resident fathering described by the men I spoke to can be organised on a spectrum: from mostly *engaged fathering*, to *sporadic*, then to *emotionally distant* fathering and, finally, to *absent* fathers. The term 'absent father' has been contested (see Mott 1990; Reynolds 2009; Lee 2013a). I use it to describe situations where sons didn't know their fathers or there had been several years without contact. These categories are for illustration and are flexible as some sons' experiences of their fathers evolved over time. The point in making these distinctions is first, to highlight the range, variety and complexity of types of fathering in this

family structure, and second, to be able to illuminate the varying emotional impacts of different kinds of experiences.

Fathers described as emotionally distant appeared to be the most common experience of a non-resident father among the sample. Experiences of emotionally distant fathers were described by participants from six families out of the 16 households represented in the study. This type was distinctive for fathers' physical presence yet emotional distance, typified by an apparent lack of investment in the parent-child relationship (as discussed in Nixon, Greene and Hogan 2012). Jay, 28, described regular visiting arrangements with his non-resident father while he was growing up. These included regular weekly visits and fortnightly overnight stays, but Jay spoke of these being disappointing times. Due to his father's work commitments, he would end up spending time with paternal relatives instead which Jay says he "resented"; "I would just be like 'I don't know why I'm here'". Similarly, Vince, 22, also spoke of his relationship with his father as "less close". He recalled trips to the barber shop and the park with him as a child, but contact became more telephone based as he approached adolescence. "It would literally just be like, 'Vince, don't get in trouble', or 'Vince, your schoolwork' - very superficial conversations". Vince and Jay explained that the nature of these experiences negatively affected how close they felt to their fathers.

Such experiences illustrate that the mere presence of non-resident fathers in children's lives does not necessarily equate to a healthy, rewarding relationship (Nixon, Greene and Hogan 2012). These sons seemed to have been very aware of how engaged their fathers were – how invested he seemed; how much he gave of himself. Previous work supports this finding (Nixon, Greene and Hogan 2012). A qualitative study by Nixon and colleagues (2012) examined the factors underlying children's feelings of closeness to their non-resident fathers. They found that these relationships were often fragile:

Children's experiences of closeness to fathers were related to perceptions of their commitment to their relationship and their obligation to the parenting role, as well as a sense of connection to and familiarity with their fathers. It was a challenge for children to feel connected to their fathers when contact arrangements were detached from caregiving activities and precluded immersion in each other's daily lives.

(Nixon, Greene and Hogan 2012:381)

This research found the majority of children did not feel connected to their fathers, as a sense of familiarity and involvement was missing (p. 385-386). If a father was perceived as coming up

short, children exercised agency in judging whether to continue the relationship (p. 387, 388). These findings add vital detail to assumptions about the relationships between non-resident fathers and their children, which have implied that the pertinent issue is whether a father is absent or present. This reductive binary does consider the quality of the father-child relationship, which this data and previous research suggest is key (Simmons *et al.* 2017). For instance, Cortney Simmons and colleagues (2017) found that harsh fathers had a more detrimental effect on sons than absent fathers.

Non-resident father and son relationships that were described as having an intermittent, erratic or unpredictable patterning are the experiences I have categorised as sporadic. Relationships of this character were described by three participants. A theme that emerged when sons described these relationships was the hurt and pain they caused - a finding that has been made in previous work (Langa 2010; Nixon, Greene and Hogan 2012). The account given by Michael, 39, of his separated father typified the sporadic in its varied patterns: regular contact when he was under ten, then a gap of contact until he was 14 when he began to see his father irregularly, with contact fading again in his late teens.

Another experience that could be characterised as sporadic was that of Samson, 21, who spoke at length of his father's tendency to miss arranged visits, a practice found to have negative ramifications for the relationship from the child's perspective (Nixon, Greene and Hogan 2012). In the following quotation Samson describes the emotional impact of this:

It was a frustration, it's like: "Why can't you be better?" But then you get to a point where you look at it for what it is and you go, "Well, actually, I feel quite sorry for you," because he wasn't able to be my dad. Like I can't imagine how *difficult* it must be to have a child out there and not be able to [*pause*] *properly* give yourself to them. The fact is he could not do what my mum did for me. And that for me makes me feel *sadness* for him. It's horrible – even now it's very, very difficult to deal with. You feel a lot of anger, and you feel very upset because it makes you question things about yourself, and that's what you spend your time as a little kid when your dad's not there. You're like [*pause*] "why am I not worth your time?" Samson

The above quotation from Samson's narrative details the mix of emotions generated by his relationship with his non-resident father. He names "frustration," "sadness" and "anger" and

describes a sense of insecurity. There was a sense that these questions remained unresolved for him. These aspects of people's accounts made me wonder what public services or spaces are available to support young people in working through such questions. Nixon and colleagues note (2012:389) young people who have experienced such situations may need support to resolve the "loss, anger, and disappointment". It is important to note here that Britain's youth services (Bola 2019: 32-33) and children's mental health services (Rocks and Tsiachristas 2019 n.p.) are currently underfunded. Writer JJ Bola suggests (2019:112-113, 115) there is an urgent need for opportunities for young men in particular to talk, to be listened to and to receive support from peers.

It seemed apparent that most of the sons I spoke to had spent time contemplating their relationship with their fathers. Some sought to rationalise their father's actions, the most common reasoning being that fathers were repeating the type of fathering they had received. But research suggests intergenerational continuities in parenting (Campbell and Gilmore 2007), particularly of the types that hurt children emotionally (see Manlove 2001: 220-221), do not automatically occur. Indeed, speaking of their "imagined futures" (Wetherell and Edley 1999a), some of the men I spoke to described their desire to do things differently when they became fathers themselves, a finding that has been made in other research (Langa 2010). Is it possible that one way in which humans can be socialised, namely, learn what *not* to do, is through the painful experiences they endure?

Out of the 16 households represented in the study, five non-resident fathers were described as absent. The majority of these sons had never met their fathers. When I asked the men how they felt about these situations, their responses were often surprising. "To be honest with you, I don't think about it at all," Barry, 20, told me. It was not possible to know if Barry was being defensive or simply resolute. "I know some people get affected," he said, "but for me, it's just been fine. I think it's just because for me I just have a good support network and I've always had my mum". Barry claimed the quality of the maternal relationship mitigated any impact of never knowing his father. Importantly, this remark highlights the under-theorisation of the influence of 'present' mothers (with exceptions, see Bush 2004 and Wilson *et al* 2012:35). Crenshaw (1989:139) has argued that black women are "theoretically erased". The under-examination of any positive impacts of present single-parent black mothers on their children is one way in which some black women, as single parents and as intersectional social actors located at race, gender and family structure, are theoretically excluded. Indeed, Barry defended against notions of lack and inadequacy about the single-mother family form. He relayed a vignette about a friend whose father

regularly undermined him, but whose mother was more supportive. “You can have a father who’s there,” he surmised “but that doesn’t necessarily mean he’s good at what he does”.

Two other men in similar situations appeared to feel likewise. Harlem-King, 19, had used his father’s non-involvement as an indication of his character, discerning that he was better off for his father’s absence. He listed traits commonly associated with masculinities that are deemed ‘toxic’ (Salam 2019; Bola 2019b), positioning his father among this imagined milieu of men:

The fact that he didn't have the bravery to stick around for me paints a picture of someone like that. And he may have changed. It's been almost 20 years. But I've got no intention of meeting him or finding closure because I don't think it would help anything, it would just be a waste of my time. *Harlem-King*

It is not possible to know if was this how Harlem-King felt or if he was guarding against more conflicted thoughts. But he does exercise agency in his sense-making about his father, as Nixon, Greene and Hogan (2012: 382, 388) also found, in carefully considering whether meeting his absent father would be a worthwhile choice. It has been suggested that representations of fathers and the role they play in the lives of their children are often idealised (McIntosh 1996:153; Thomas 2001:130-131; Langa 2010:519-520). Harlem-King seemed aware of this, in his speculation that if he had been raised in the heteropatriarchal nuclear family form, “I would have been more misogynistic”. Research suggests some fathers can induct sons into sexism (Thomas 2001:134-135). This is one way, among others, that present fathers who display undesirable traits and behaviours might be more harmful than absent fathers (Simmons *et al.* 2017). Simmons and colleagues state (2017:16) “it may be irresponsible to encourage fathers to be involved without acknowledging the importance of the quality of the father-child relationship”. Reflecting on the “greater risk” posed by “harsh” fathers, they caution against any policy which emphasises re-engaging fathers, suggesting the prioritising of “knowledge and parenting skills to positively raise their children” (Simmons 2017:16).

At the time of our interview, Jeremiah had not had contact with his father for 10 years. He had a clear position on this:

I do feel that he is, or was, someone who just didn’t care enough to want to form a very strong relationship with me ... I’d always seen him as a visitor. *Jeremiah*

The majority of the men who experienced father absence described the situation in a matter-of-fact, almost detached manner. From patriarchal perspectives such detachment is in fact denial masking grief and “father-hunger” (see Bly 1990; Balcolm 1998; Sewell 2010, 2018, 2019). Evidence from my research accounts contradicts this view. Indeed, the men in my sample didn’t match the dominant representations of young men in this family structure. To reiterate, it has repeatedly been claimed that without the guidance of a father or father figure the sons of single mothers are often troubled, and prone to violence and anti-social behaviour (Lammy 2008, 2011; Cameron 2011; Phillips 2011; Sewell 2009, 2010, 2018, 2019; Liddle 2019). This caricatured depiction of single mothers’ sons is dangerous - it has the potential to demonise young men located at axes of gender, race and family structure, working to legitimate any harsh treatment by those in authority. Sons’ narratives indicate the intersectional social construction of sons raised by single-parent women is accurate. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, these social constructions have drawn on negative tropes about blackness, youth, masculinity, and single-mother families. In stark contrast, the narratives of the sons gave me the impression they were individuals who were self-aware, contemplative and introspective. They were processing any difficult experiences of a non-resident father in their inner worlds, drawing on their inner resources. These situations did preoccupy thoughts and cause pain (Langa 2010) and even anger (see Nixon, Greene and Hogan 2012) – but the sons seemed able to work through this. To be clear, I do not wish to minimise the difficulty of such suffering or suggest that people's difficulties are simply private matters. Quite the contrary, it seems that young people in such circumstances would benefit from space in which to talk, be heard and understood (see Bola 2019b:112-113, 115). This may be a general issue for young people raised in single-parent families (Nixon *et al.* 2012:389). What I am trying to make clear is that sons have been discussed and represented in distorted, misleading ways which deny their agency and resilience.

Santiago, 20, spoke at length and emotively about the situation with his father. He had no memory of meeting him. At one point, during Santiago's teens, telephone contact was made and there was some communication, but his father broke contact before they could meet. During our two interviews, Santiago also described a difficult relationship with his mother.

[T]here were certain days when it was like, 'wow,' like it'd really get you. I wouldn't say it's depression but it's *overwhelming* sadness like, it's not a sadness when you cry, it's a sadness when you're literally just like, [exhales sharply] 'Wow' ... because remember because mum's very absent now. So you have no mum, you have no dad ... but then you're walking in your day-to-day life and you're seeing kids with their parents ...

Santiago

There is a clear sense of loss in Santiago's words. In public, he glimpses parent/child dyads in relationships that appear functional and compares this with his situation. Santiago claimed he had resolved what he called "my bitterness" about his father, but it may have exacerbated the impact of his difficulties with his mother, as his sole parent. Santiago's mention of his mother as "absent" is important. It suggests that the impact of father absence can be exacerbated by a poor relationship with the other parent. Conversely, it has been asserted that a positive dyadic relationship between single mother and child can be "good enough" to meet a child's needs (MacCallum and Golombok 2004; Franséhn and Bäck-Wiklund 2008), including those of boys (Bush 2004). Recall Barry's words above regarding never knowing his father: "it's just been fine...I've always had my mum". Of course, Barry may have been deflecting. But the data and previous research both suggest that what is important is not the *number* of parental relationships that young people have but the *nature* of any parent-child relationship.

Experiences of mostly-engaged non-resident fathers were found to be the least common of those reported. Among the 16 households represented by mother and son participants, two non-resident fathers were described as mostly-engaged, the fathers of participants Aaron and Lenny. Their fathers were distinguishable for their dependability and demonstrated commitment (see Nixon, Greene and Hogan 2012) to their sons. For example, the father/son relationship described by Aaron, 25, had a consistent and rhythmic frequency. While growing up he would spend every other weekend with his father, and at the time of our interview, he was living with him for part of the week. Lenny's father visited regularly during weekends and school breaks and had taken holidays with his former partner and children. At the time of our second interview Lenny, 20, had recently returned from a trip to the Caribbean with his father and uncle. Lenny felt the time had had a positive impact on him, having observed his male relatives sorting out some family business:

It was me, my dad and my uncle at a house, it was just us men. So obviously I'm watching how they are, the things that they do and I'm picking up on it, and then realising I've actually got to step up and do certain things. *Lenny*

For Lenny, it seemed this time alone with senior male relatives was "obviously" an opportunity to observe and learn. It has been asserted (Butler 1988; Bola 2019b) that gender is not natural but "a performative accomplishment" (Butler 1988:520). For Judith Butler (1988:519) one of the ways gendered identity is constituted is through the repetition of particular acts and practices. In watching his dad and his uncle handling family business, it could be said Lenny was observing some performative acts and practices of masculinity. Responding to this, I asked if he felt having grown up in a single-mother household he had missed out on such experiences: "I sort of get an aspect of that going to rugby," he said, "but to see my own people being men, it's different." It appeared there was something important for Lenny in observing accomplished gendered performances of not only family members but those sharing aspects of his identity. The claimed necessity of role models being sex-specific and the function public spaces may play in socialisation are discussed later in the chapter.

During interviews, I asked sons if they believed they had missed out on certain things due to growing up without their fathers in the home. Only occasionally did this question elicit a substantial answer. This could have been due to sons' loyalty to their mothers or reluctance to reinforce assumptions of their family structure or the dyadic relationship. However, two sons, Jay and Santiago, described a loss in expressing self-doubt in their ability to establish or sustain a romantic relationship. Even though a minority of the sample expressed this, it is focused on briefly here because sons' responses to this self-doubt are significant for this study.

Jay felt he lacked important knowledge and experience because he had not witnessed the everyday realities of a couple relationship:

I think it would have been good to have been in a home where I could see how a man treats a woman, to tell me about a relationship. I think I get bored quite quickly. With my ex, it was good to see her siblings and her parents all together, the same with my cousin, his parents have been together for so long. I guess that if you grow up seeing that as a relationship model, you believe that's how it can be ... I've got another friend whose parents are still together and out of all my friends, he's the only one that's been in a long-term relationship - he's been in that relationship for six years.

Jay

Jay's reflection raises the question of where, in a society that prepares young people to contribute to the labour market but not for a fulfilling personal life, can knowledge and understanding of couple relationships be accessed. While schools are increasingly educating learners about healthy relationships (see Department of Education 2019), this is a marginal part of school life. Variation in young people's domestic lives means unequal amounts of knowledge can be drawn on in future. Of course, a lack of relevant knowledge does not determine social actors' romantic futures, as accounts of men who grew up in single-parent homes attest (Ewing 2016; Fuller 2019). Ultimately, I viewed this self-awareness and personal reflection as positive.

In regard to relationships, there was a sense that young men were learning how they could do things differently through difficult experiences. A belief exists that children live out poor examples set by their caregivers, including the presumption that poor fathers produce poor fathers (Murray 1990). This claim is based on the assumption that individuals do not exercise agency in making judgements and defining their standards, and that they do learn valuable lessons from harsh realities. As discussed in relation to mothers in Chapter 6, there is evidence which demonstrates that adults discern between which parenting practices they will continue out of those they were subject to during childhood (Manlove 2001: 220-221). In many sons' narratives, there were signs that they were identifying *what not to do*, as they were reflecting on how they would like to do things differently as family members. After Santiago described how not knowing his father had impacted him emotionally, he resolved "it's a thing of 'we need to change this'. We are *going* to change this". He went on to speak about trying to develop "positive relationships" with his two younger siblings. In reasoning that, as an older brother, the responsibility for the psychological support of younger siblings was at least in part his, Santiago seemed to be drawing on cultural scripts of normative masculinity (Wetherell and Edley 1999b). Similarly, when I asked Vince what his experience of the single-parent family structure had taught him, one thing for him was "lessons

for when I will start my family, just things like being available". I asked him to explain what he meant by "available":

Hopefully, I'll be in a better situation than my mum was because for my entire life I've thought, 'I have to do this by myself. I didn't really *think* there was much help out there for me from family, friends or whatever, I just thought, 'Okay, I have this problem, I'm going to sort it out by myself'. ... So, I don't want my kids to have to do that because I'll be there for that reason: "I'm here to help you, whatever you need." I want my kids to have a better life than I did, so because I know better I should do better. That's what I meant by being available, and *emotionally* available as well ... I want them to be able to come to me and say "Dad, I have this problem, can you help me sort it out?" *Vince*

Vince does not identify with the parenting approach he experienced growing up. He uses agency in making judgements about what to discontinue and in imagining how he could be a more effective parent. For Michael, the sons of single mothers try to do parenting and family differently specifically *because* of their domestic experiences. During our interview, I asked for his thoughts on the assumption that men raised by single-parent women were "angry and violent" having not learned "balanced notions of gender" from their fathers. "All my friends are not like that. In fact, we'll do the opposite". Michael responded. He gave me a run-down of three friends of his, all sons of single mothers and committed fathers, step-fathers and partners. "I would say if anything it's made them less angry, and more willing to make their relationships work, just because you've seen what your mum went through."

Some stories available through journalistic writing (Ewing 2016; Fuller 2019) also contradict the dominant assumption about the family futures of men raised by single mothers. For example, Marvyn Harrison, founder of the Dope Black Dads podcast, was raised by a single mother and is a married father of two. His podcast works to challenge limited and negative connotations of black fatherhood. He said in an interview (Fuller 2019, n.p): "I decided I wasn't going to use the fact that I never knew my dad as a get-out for being a bad father myself".

The discussion above outlines the variety of experiences of non-resident fathers among sons of single mothers in the study, which counters dominant representations of absence and illuminates a space for new intersectional discourses on family structure, race and gender. The narratives of sons revealed the emotional dimension of this family type for many sons. At a societal level, consideration of children's psychological needs has been obscured by political concern about

how the material needs of women and children will be met (Fox Harding 1996; Butler 2017, 2019). Sons often experienced disappointment, hurt and pain due to difficult experiences of fathers, but they were self-aware, able to name their various feelings and to work through them. Some of the discourses detailed in Chapter 1 assume that single-mother-raised young men lack the inner resources to process difficulties. As previously mentioned, Lee argues (2013a:n.p.), that there has been a failure to recognise black people as "in touch with [their] emotions". However, such feelings were processed internally, rather than through acting out and sons were used agency in making judgements about relationships and in imagining doing things differently in their future domestic lives.

The findings detailed in this section demonstrate a need for more recognition of and attention to subjectivity and interiority at intersections of race, gender and family structure. Parents and young people have been objectified in media, academic and policy narratives. Arguably due to racist single-parentism, they have been either problematised or overlooked due to their multidimensional difference. The findings analysed here demonstrate the need for a constructive, intersectional knowledge project that more fully theorises the experiences of young people growing up within black single-mother families.

7.2 Other present men

Some sons had other men present in their lives, apart from their fathers; uncles, grandfathers and stepfathers. These relationships are examined here because single mother-son dyads have been discussed as if they live without connection to others, men in particular. The belief that boys raised by women do not develop a balanced notion of masculinity stems from this assumption. Scholars have long argued that the non-residence of a father has been confused with the absence of all males from the lives of the children of single mothers (Jarrett 1994; Reynolds 2010:18). The presences of these senior men in young men's lives illustrate the variety of their relationship experiences.

Of the sample of ten sons, the narratives of four in parts focused on men other than their fathers who had played an important role in their lives. Jeremiah recalled the roles his maternal uncles played in his childhood:

[T]hey were very active in my life and would take me and my cousins to different places. My uncle is really into comics and superheroes and used to take us to all of those kinds of events ... And my other uncle would take us out to play football, or to see a football game, or to the zoo.

Jeremiah

Lenny also spoke about his maternal uncles. Stories of these relatives' youth in London demonstrated to him the possibility of overcoming obstacles.

My uncles, they've had their setbacks growing up in London because they grew up in a time where it was very racist, they used to get pulled into the back of police vans and get beaten up. So, they had things against them, but the positions that they are in now, they don't reflect that.

Lenny

The resilience demonstrated by elder relatives of Lenny's, in surviving and succeeding despite a difficult social landscape, was encouraging to him. Harlem-King perceived a more practical act as important; being regularly driven by his grandfather. At different points in the interview, he described the area's reputation for violence and crime. For him, the safety of the car's private space separated him from the often-challenging milieu of the local streets. These examples show that older men have been present and active in some sons' lives in different ways. It is such nuances as these that are usually missing from narrow discourses and bleak representations of single-mother family life.

Another matter often overlooked is that single-mother households sometimes come to include a single-parent woman's partner. As mentioned, the single-parent family form is sometimes transitory for households – on average, single mothers in the UK re-partner after five years (Skew 2009). The non-residence of a child's father does not reveal everything about the constitution of the family household and the important figures in the lives of these dyads (as discussed in Jarret 1994; Randolph 1996; Reynolds 2010:18). A small minority of the sample of sons, two out of ten, had stepfathers (Amato 1987) who joined their family.

Harlem-King said he had not bonded with his step-father, who joined the household when he was approximately age ten. This was because "he never really made the effort to establish a relationship with me". As with fathers, this quotation from Harlem-King indicates the importance of the perceived commitment (Nixon, Greene and Hogan 2012) of a potential parental figure. Michael's mother was in a cohabiting relationship during his childhood that lasted 15 years. Michael recalled his mother's former partner as a complex character, "a gangster" who "spoke

perfect English, had a first in architecture, spoke fluent Japanese ... he used to wear tailor-made suits, tailor-made shoes ... used to train all the time, he looked smart and had beautiful handwriting". Across our two interviews, Michael described a sporadic-type relationship with his father. He told me it was instead this man he had wanted to be like during his younger years. Michael recalled his mother's former partner advising him on how to use crime to earn a living. He described being inspired by his aesthetic tastes but choosing not to emulate the criminality. From his narrative, it appears Michael was able to exercise agency in discerning between which of his stepfather's influences to adopt and which to reject.

Research evidence shows that the transmission of a caregiver's morals, values (Barni *et al.* 2011) or behaviours (Manlove 2001: 220-221) are not inevitable, but dependent on factors including if the parent figure and child share a similar perspective as well as their level of closeness (Barni *et al.* 2011:117). There is evidence that intergenerational transmission of practices and behaviours is ultimately dependent on young people's own judgements (Manlove 2001:220-221), which they make as active agents. Indeed, there is growing recognition of children and young people as social actors with some agency and power "to shape their own circumstances within the ... constraints of social institutions such as the family" (Chambers and Gracia 2022:91).

These complex experiences indicate that the arrival of stepfathers is not necessarily a positive development in family life for the children of single-parent women, as found in previous research (Amato 1987:333). I state this as it has been assumed that stepfathers fill a void for growing boys, as male role models who can provide gendered guidance. But the narrations above show there are mediating factors involved; the stepfather's inclination to be involved with his partner's child; his commitment to the relationship; if he and/or his way of living is rejected or accepted by the child.

Single-parentist essentialism has constructed dyads as socially isolated (Phoenix 1987:52) and male children raised by women as separated from men. However, this data shows there may be men besides fathers who are a part of sons' lives, although narratives suggest these experiences vary in the nature of their influence. Sons' assortment of kin relationships and more broadly, their heterogeneous experiences of family structure are less understood due to their neglected intersectional location. Scholars have argued that a lack of knowledge of multiply-marginalised subjects misguides policy, practice and representation (Crenshaw 1989:140; Nash 2008:4, 3). Findings such as those detailed in this section demonstrate the need for critical and nuanced knowledge of the dyad for a more comprehensive understanding of their lives.

7.3 Responses to the male role model narrative

The belief that boys raised by single-parent women need male role models to buck negative statistical trends is pervasive (see Department for Communities and Local Government 2007; Sewell 2009, 2010, 2018, 2019; Khan *et al.* 2017:60) to the point it has become common sense (see Biddulph 1994; Barbieri 2018). It has been noted that this dominant understanding is unsubstantiated (Tarrant *et al.* 2015: 61). Some perceive (Tarrant *et al.* 2015; Matthews 2018) such interventions as part of a war on particular boys, those who are working-class and/or black, due to concerns about social disorder, delinquency and crime (Tarrant 2015:62; Gilroy 2013b:33). This narrative works to distract from systemic inequalities, as Tarrant and colleagues observe:

... structural explanations for the difficulties some young men face are strategically avoided through this discourse, and the male role model discourse thus becomes an individualising and often blaming strategy that seems to serve interests quite removed from those of young men. Such an approach, therefore, ignores the agency of the individuals ...
(Tarrant *et al.* 2015:74)

The existence of a large number of mentoring programmes in Britain's inner cities specifically aimed at black boys is best understood in the context of the proportion being raised in single-mother households. Tracey Reynolds observes:

A disturbing trend with these programmes is their casual attempt to link explanations of educational outcomes for boys to particular ideas about what the "right" types of family and parenting are.
(Reynolds 2009:n.p)

Assumptions of family deficit underpinning this social action can serve to have a counterproductive effect on mother-son dyads in terms of how they perceive their family and life chances.

In the research interviews, asking sons if they had ever had a male role model left many struggling to name someone. Jay responded: "I don't know if I actually had a role model, so maybe I learned how to be from TV and stuff." Similarly, Santiago said:

I never had a role model. Who you see now is the person who had to go and search for information and use that for himself, but then also I'm very clear on my personality.
Santiago

Santiago had mentioned using online resources, specifically YouTube videos, to make sense of socio-historic issues as well as the single mother-son dyad. Interestingly, online life as a resource did not emerge as a theme across sons' interviews.

Only one of the sons, Samson, 21, expressed the belief that a male role model would have been positive for him. He said he had received some mentoring in his professional life and found it was good for him: "I feel like that was important, very important to helping me grow." He continued:

I don't want to take away from the job that mums do by suggesting that what they've done will never be complete, they'll never fully be able to raise their children because I think that's an inappropriate thing to say. I think your mum can absolutely provide you with what you need, but I do also think there is this space where even if it's just knowing that you are okay as you are, I think you need to hear a male voice say that to you at some point.

Samson

It seemed that for Samson, validation from an older male would have been reassuring. The specificity of someone who shares his gendered identity but also has a deep understanding of him suggests this is not a role that his mother or a paid professional could fulfil. Others seemed conflicted about the claims of male role model discourse. Rugby coach Aaron worked with young people and described what he had observed in his work life: "I think it's important that young kids have role models" he told me. "When I go into schools, boys that are in trouble, probably don't have that. And really rugby is a tool for their anger I guess because it's a physical sport." Thinking about the impact of not having a regularly present father he added: "At the same time I think maybe it affects some kids more than others - there are people out there that don't have a dad figure and have done all right".

Part of Aaron's quotation draws on negative assumptions about the impact of single-parent family structure on children and young people. However, it does raise an important question: why do some sons of single mothers thrive in their family circumstances when others do not? What sons' narratives are showing is that viewing young black men as determined, or shaped, by their family structure overlooks their agency and tenacity (Tarrant *et al.* 2015:74). Difficulties should not be assumed to stem from single-parent family structure.

Another important theme that emerged from the data was that some sons viewed their mothers and other women relatives as role models. The narrations of these men indicated that role models need not be sex-specific. For Harlem-King this notion was "bullshit. I think everyone can be a role

model for anyone.” The potential of women to be effective role models to young men (Carrington, Tymms and Merrell 2006) deserves further research attention. Scholars have noted single-parent women's positive influence on their sons (Langa 2010:523) and their children generally irrespective of gender (Greenberg and Shenaar-Golan 2018). A conversation about this seems to be developing in the popular sphere (see Noah 2016; Reid 2017; Younge 2020).

When I ask Aaron about whom he looked up to growing up he replied: "My mum was my main role model. And then my dad was around." Later, he also mentioned his maternal grandmother as playing "a massive role" in his life. Jay mentioned his feeling confident in embarking on self-employment as his mother had been self-employed for some years. Similarly, Michael said: "The male role models that I've had in my life have been scant - they've all been women." The following quotation is from my second interview with Michael, when I asked him about characterising his mother as "strong", in recognition of the problematic nature of the strong black woman trope, as discussed in chapter 6. He explained:

I would say the strongest people I know are my mum and my gran, simply because they maintained ... that's not easy. I know now there are times that my dad was violent, there were times I saw her crying, when she had no money and when she struggled to look after me but I remember my childhood being perfect. Anything I wanted I always had. And I know that's not easy to do. As an adult, I recognise that. I think to myself, 'You did that with no money – how did you do that? Maintained your social life, maintained your job and didn't really complain'. I look at my nan, and she's the same. She came from another country to a place where people don't really want us, and as a single parent herself with several kids, no man around. Worked in a job, experienced racism – *overt* racism – and still maintained and was able to smile. When I say 'strong', it's not because I think it was easy, they were strong because of what they went through and how they maintained.

Michael

Michael describes the resilience and persistence of his migrant maternal grandmother and his mother in the face of gendered and racialised inequalities. It is their character he admires and their sex difference is irrelevant to him.

Vince shared a different view. He felt women could be mentors to young men but not role models, due to what he felt was the distinctive nature of the black male experience, which he felt only other men in the same social position could empathise with. This was a stance some mothers

had internalised, as discussed in chapter 6 and found in other research (Bush 2004). However, some of the sons' racialised experiences were not gender-exclusive, as is discussed later in the following chapter. I had not asked sons specifically about the influence of their mothers, this was a theme that emerged through their talk, allowing them to define their own situations, one benefit of the type of qualitative interview used. It is one finding in particular that deserves further investigation.

Beyond academic work, the positive influence women have had in raising boys has been documented in different forms: in memoir by writer and professor Kiese Laymon (2016, 2018) and by comedian and political commentator, Trevor Noah (2016), and in journalism including interviews with Laymon (Noor 2018), with musicians Loyle Carner (Lewis 2019) and Gregory Porter (Ewing 2016), as well as a personal essay by writer and sociologist Gary Younge (2020). Rapper Loyle Carner explained (Lewis 2019) that being raised by female elders meant he learned as a boy to discuss his feelings: "I was raised by women, by my mother and my grandmother, and they would talk about how they felt every day," he remembered. "...It was liberating, it helped me a lot". The musician Gregory Porter (Ewing 2016) shared that he gained his values and work ethic from his single mother, while Gary Younge has also paid tribute to the woman who raised him and his two siblings as a single parent in 1970s and 80s Britain:

She was an anti-colonialist and an anti-racist, an internationalist and humanist who would have never used any of those words to describe herself. Race-conscious as she was, most of her community activism – youth clubs, literacy classes, discos in the church hall – took place in the working-class white community. They were her people, too... She believed the world she wanted to create was never going to come to her, so she would have to take the fight to it. I saw her confront the local National Front candidate, the police and her union – to name but a few ... (Younge 2020:n.p.)

Such nuance is rarely captured in discussions about the black single mother-dyad. This is not to imply that experiences were never contradictory, complex or difficult (see Hattenstone 2014; Laymon 2016, 2018; Noor 2018). However, the narratives examined here raise questions about the notion that women caregivers are *not* valued and respected by the boys they raise (see Sewell 2009:63), and that women's care impedes the development of young men (Moynihan 1965:18-19). These claims are unsubstantiated and erroneous and can be understood as stemming from sexist single-parentism, which in the case of black single-parent women is compounded by racism.

Due to unequal balances of power, subjects located at the intersection of blackness, masculinity and youth have not been able to institute their definitions of their situations, specifically of their parent-child relationships and their family lives. Such perspectives like those expressed by sons above undermine dominant narratives on the dyad and family structure. It is such accounts which could make an important contribution to a critical knowledge project on the intersection of single-mother family structure, blackness and young masculinity. The analysis above indicates there is a need to question dominant assumptions about the type of socialisation boys need to develop and flourish.

7.4 Negotiating racialised gender

In the final section of this chapter, I examine sons' responses to prejudgements and negative stereotypes generated at the intersection of 'race', gender and age. I show how sons generally learn critical knowledge about masculinities through social life, with some finding social spaces to resist and subvert limiting social expectations of racialised gender. Sons' words are central here which is important in light of the negative, ubiquitous meanings of young black masculinities, particularly those of the sons of single mothers.

One of the key themes that emerged from sons' reflections on gendered identity was their critique of 'normative' masculinity. The following quotations show there was recognition that dominant understandings of masculinity were arbitrary, reflecting an increasing, critical societal reflection on masculinity (Salam 2018; Bola 2019b):

...There isn't a concrete definition of how to be a man. Masculinity is such a weird construct [pause] I would say it's quite a negative construct ... *Vince*

All the men in my life have this notion of masculinity, that to be a man you need to do this or do that. I have that same kind of environment where I go to the gym: "men are like this" - it's all bullshit". *Michael*

The above quotations show sons distancing themselves from normative masculinity, exercising agency in their judgement of socially-defined masculinity. A significant portion of the sons I spoke to demonstrated critical consciousness in identifying problematic aspects of and dissociating from 'normative' masculinities. Again, this demonstrates that sons are not passively shaped by their gendered identity. The nature of a thought shared by Harlem-King is an example of this. He described a culture of black women being "treated badly" and named what he perceived as the

roots of this issue: "it's misogyny, its sexism, its patriarchy, its masculinity, its ego". Such remarks reflected the enlightened attitudes of most sons in the sample. At the same time, it could be argued that it is not enough to simply be aware of problematic patterns, as it seemed Harlem-King, 19, was, which begs the question: in what ways are the sons of single-parent women finding ways to be different kinds of men?

Barry, who had never met his father and said he didn't have other male relatives in his life, described learning about gendered identities by observing the men in his church and in movies, noting positive attributes of male protagonists. What Barry describes is an example of the social-learning model of socialisation (Sayers 1987:27). Janet Sayers (1987:27) notes that from this perspective prescribed gendered behaviour is learned through observation of adult figures, other children and media representation. "I think you can learn a lot from observing, to be honest with you". Barry said. "Sometimes you don't need to even speak to someone because even if you just watch what someone does from a distance, you can just learn a lot." At another point in the interview, he provided an example:

I knew a guy, he was in the sixth form and for me at the time, I saw him as quite a cool role model because he's an Afro-Caribbean guy and he used to go about with this big high top [haircut]. He was really smart but at the same time, he used to DJ a lot as well. So, I found it really interesting that this guy was getting A star and A grades but was also DJ-ing and into hip-hop and R&B: he was just a really cool guy. I didn't speak to him but I used to look at what he was doing and think 'I want to be like that.'

Barry

In identifying an appropriate role model among the "marketplace of masculinities" in the institutional space of the school, Barry exercised agency. The dominant view has been that the sons of single mothers are vulnerable to deviant influences (see Sewell 2009; Cameron 2011; Lammy 2011) due to their misconceptions of masculinity. Barry's imagination was captured by an older student demonstrating one way of thriving academically while also being perceived to be "cool". It is important to acknowledge that coolness has been synonymous with the masculinities of black men (Majors and Billson 1993; Jackson 2018). I wondered if dominant racialised gendered scripts were imposing some constraint on Barry's identity construction (Bola 2019a:87). He claimed he had not felt pressure to perform a particular type of black masculinity: "I'm just me," he said. A maths and computing undergraduate university student at the time of our interview, Barry had described his commitment to his studies at secondary school. In the light of

race/gendered expectations, how socially safe was it for him to be just a dedicated student? Did Barry feel it was necessary to be cool to survive socially at school? Most of the young men described an *awareness* of expectation that they would perform gendered blackness as young black men. Research shows normative masculinities have served as the main reference to social actors even as they distanced themselves from them (Wetherell and Edley 1999b).

Four of the ten men I spoke to said they had been identified as “different” by peers, having transgressed dominant notions of black male identity, while growing up. Two of the sons said they had been labelled “effeminate”. Santiago appeared to agree that he had, what he called “feminine tendencies,” which he felt were best understood in the context of having been “raised around a lot of women.” He said this had meant being “ostracised” by his peers. For him, dominant notions of blackness had a role in this. Santiago perceived that from the perspectives of black girls he was “different - so I am either gay or weird. You know, that’s a big thing in our community: if you’re not a thug, or not ‘masculine’, you’re either gay or weird”. Although Santiago seemed to successfully resist social pressure in not performing a socially prescribed form of gendered blackness, he spoke of being socially disciplined through judgement and rejection. Harlem-King also said he was “alienated” by others at secondary school: “I never really made an effort to conform,” he said. In the following quotation, he described himself as a secondary school student:

I enjoyed writing. I enjoyed laying down in the grass and talking, listening to music and making music. I liked the sun - that school backed onto a park, so I’d just go to the park and start reading or whatever, it was nice. That’s not what everyone else did though, so I guess there was the unspoken pressure, of being an outcast in some type of way, feeling the need to conform but never doing so. *Harlem-King*

The above quotations suggest some sons confront a dilemma, adhering to limiting race/gendered scripts or risking sanction. There are reasons for optimism in the fact that sons seemed to be able to be self-defining and resist social pressures. But it is also significant that despite a seemingly expanding range of identities available to young black men (see Blay 2015; Hairston 2015; Okwonga 2019) sons’ everyday experiences at the intersection of race, gender and class didn’t reflect this – indicating that a mythic, homogeneous ‘black masculinity’ remained pervasive. As JJ Bola writes:

You will find as a young Black male that there is very little room to navigate around these identities. Young Black men are socialised (sometimes pressured) into

performing these roles... because of what is expected of them. However, there is a large group, a whole subculture of young Black males, who grew up in cultures that wouldn't ordinarily be associated with Black men... much of which is becoming more widely visible because of social and independent media. Nonetheless, the change in representation and the impact on Black male identity in society is slow to manifest.

(Bola 2019a:87)

These sons experienced judgement and sanction as the boundaries of racialised gender were policed. In this way, their resistance to raced/gendered forces was subject to constraint. Another theme that emerged from some sons' accounts was that intersectional social constructions of young black masculinity meant some young men were having to confront assumptions that they were a threat (Dow 2016a; Bola 2019a). The impact of the combination of stereotypes of youth, blackness and masculinity was that young black male bodies were a negative signifier to some, associated with violence or aggression. Some men described the frustration of the unfair imposition of such meanings, as detailed in this quotation from Michael's narrative:

It's a thing that you will grapple with as a young black man in places where you go where it's 100% male. People have certain expectations of you, they want you to be a certain way. People come up to me and they want me to be a bit more aggressive – I can see it in them. They'll say stuff to you and 90% of the time I can laugh it off but the other 10% – sometimes it upsets me. And I ask them, "Why do you see me like that?" I say: "In all honesty do I look like that?" Because if you look into my eyes, you can see it, that I'm not that way.

Michael

Santiago described similar interactions with white students at university. He mentioned being told he looked like a "hot head", and "aggressive":

"It's that thing where you judge me from the physical, but as soon as you start talking to me, you're like "Wait! This guy's not like what I thought!"

Santiago

Santiago recognised that in the "judging him from the physical", negative meanings were imposed on his raced/gendered body. This seemed frustrating for him, but his comments imply he felt able to destabilise negative prejudgements and misreadings. But this made me wonder about the impact of such experiences, if any, on young black men who do not feel able to confound prejudgements. Ultimately this is a position that they should not be in, and labour like what

Santiago describes should not have to be performed. This is another way in which the experience of youth at the intersection of blackness, masculinity and youth is distinctive. Another example of this was Harlem-King's description of being viewed as threatening by certain members of the public in the East London neighbourhood in which grew up. He spoke at length about Hackney, having changed in population due to gentrification (Atkinson 2004; Kirkland 2008; Parekh 2015; Sargeant 2019) which meant he was now being regarded with caution in public space. Other research has shown the impact that such neighbourhood dynamics can have on well-being and health (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010:168-169). Harlem-King's response is described in the following quotation:

On the street, it's really funny. Cross the road [away from me], I don't care, I'll cross too. Not that I find it funny to make people feel scared and intimidated, but what are you scared and intimidated by?

Harlem-King

These accounts of Michael, Santiago and Harlem-King, taken from many similar reflections, illustrate the unfair negative assumptions negotiated in everyday life as a result of their multiply-marginalised social positioning. The impact of intersectional social constructions combining stereotypes about youth, blackness and masculinity, meant negative meanings about young black men eclipsed sons' individuality. Dominant assumptions are shaped by narrow and limited representations, pathologising images which remain etched in the societal common sense. A broader range of representations of Black British people does not exist due to societal asymmetries of power.

One positive finding that emerged from narratives was that a large portion of the sons interviewed, half of the sample, had found social and emotional support within community spaces in which gendered and/or racial stereotypes could be subverted. These places can be understood as forms of counter-spaces. In the literature, counter-spaces (Grier-Reed 2010; Jackson 2018:9) have been conceptualised as sanctuaries or safe spaces where black students could enjoy support away from raced/classed microaggressions. I draw on this concept in using it to describe liberating spaces in which sons could be vulnerable and engage in emotional honesty with support.

At the time of our interview, Jeremiah was spending a year studying at an American Ivy League University. He described how being a member of a society for black male students at the institution had been rewarding and affirming. One initiation process involved male students writing letters to themselves intended for after graduation, which they were then ask read aloud to the 100-strong

group. Reflecting on the exercise, Jeremiah said many of the letters were “very personal and vulnerable” and he found the exercise useful for making sense of what it meant to be in an elite university space as a young black person communally with others. This scene described by Jeremiah, of young black men freely discussing their interior lives in a supportive space, is a marked departure from dominant representations of black masculinities (as discussed in hooks 2004; Bola 2019a, 2019b). Jeremiah’s account provides an optimistic image at a time when it is increasingly being asked how men can develop such emotional skills (see Reiner 2016).

In the following interview excerpt Jeremiah described the critical perspective of black masculinities he was developing:

For me, it was so powerful to see how many different black male identities there are, so there are people who have very deep voices but then do ballet, and then there are others who are very softly-spoken and do breakdancing so that was just so reassuring for me to get to see how there isn't just one mould ... because I play basketball, I felt this pressure to fit into this black male athlete [persona]. I think I'm still finding the balance between what it means to me to be a black male athlete and to study anthropology at [this university].

Jeremiah

Jeremiah sensed that being a young black male athlete required a particular performance due to narrow and limiting cultural scripts (Bola 2019a, 2019b). Dominant representations were the references typically drawn on in making sense of gendered identity, as other research has found (see Wetherell and Edley 1999b). Jeremiah refers to constraint but also the discovery of other young people defying social expectations.

Other counter-spaces were experienced by sons. Vince, Barry, Samson and Jeremiah were mentees of The Amos Bursary, a London-based charity supporting promising students of African-Caribbean heritage. It is important to acknowledge here that organisations focused on supporting black boys have been critiqued for marginalising black girls (see Crenshaw 2014:n.p.), whose systemic challenges are not significantly different. Positive social action for black youth has disproportionately focused on boys. Interestingly when research interviews were taking place, The Amos Bursary only focused on male students but has since broadened its remit to include female students.

Sons described building social and emotional capital through the organisation. Samson described the Amos Bursary as “not just a network, it’s like a fraternity”. This was evident in how Barry

repeatedly referred to his “Bursary brothers”. Vince said he found others in the same social position to admire in the space: “when I first started and met older boys I thought, ‘Wow, look at all these great things these black boys are doing’”. He also spoke about how the group occasionally provided space for shared reflection which he’d found valuable:

... we talk about stuff like “what does it mean to be a man?” You can talk about the relationship you have with your father, and just different things, exploring masculinity ... the pressures of being a black man in this world. And because everyone can relate, it’s a learning experience ...

Vince

The space provided by this youth organisation for reflection on family, identity and positioning. Where do young people more broadly turn for such reflection and support? It is argued that more spaces are needed (Bola 2019a:112-113, 115). Indeed, Harlem-King spoke of feeling that he would have benefitted from a space of emotional support while growing up. In the following quote he described what would have ideally been involved:

To be able to talk about not having a father, to be able to talk about just having a mum and like, femininity and masculinity and what the boundaries of it are and what that looks like and that sort of support. Not necessarily a therapist or a psychiatrist but like, just someone to talk to who is not going to judge you ...

Harlem-King

The above quotation underscores the need for easily accessible spaces for reflection, sharing and support. There was evidence that social and emotional capital could be found in unexpected spaces. For Lenny, time as a member of a local rugby club had been formative. He described he was guided toward better sportspersonship by his coach, learning to manage his frustrations and communicate appropriately with teammates during games. Support also extended off-pitch. He described the way his peers rallied after he learned of the passing of a close relative:

Everyone was holding me and they were all saying to me, 'No one is going to judge you for crying. You can cry, let it out here now'. So, everyone was giving me their shoulder to cry on and I was bawling snot and everything. They didn't care it was like, 'Yeah, let it out now so that when you're with your family, you can be there for them.

Lenny

Thought about together, these counter-spaces offered young men communal spaces for emotional honesty and vulnerability (Reiner 2016; Bola 2019b; Bost, Bruce and Manning 2019)

as well as support in reflecting on and making sense of challenging experiences. Sons' narratives describe these counter-spaces as supportive and non-judgemental. This finding indicates that single-mother-raised sons can identify appropriate opportunities to explore masculinity. This finding suggests that claims that sons turn to gangs and "the streets" for male influence (Cameron 2011:n.p; Sewell 2009:63), as detailed in Chapter 1, are an inaccurate generalisation. Such spaces are important in a society which denies black vulnerability and interiority. It is important to acknowledge that access to such spaces – universities, organisations for the academically successful, and membership of a sports club – are not universal, which signals a need for inclusive communal spaces in which young people can find social and emotional support.

Narratives analysed in this section demonstrate sons' deployment of critical consciousness and their ability to defy limiting notions of racial/gendered identity to be self-defining. This is contrary to some of the distorted narratives about single mother-raised sons outlined at the beginning of the thesis. These findings suggest that the subjectivities of single black mother-raised sons have not been understood in their complexity. Arguably this is because their experiences take place at a location of the intersection, at race, gender, age and family structure neglected by research and theory. Constructive perspectives on the lives of children raised by single-parent black women could be instituted by an intersectional critical knowledge project examining and theorising the intersection of family structure, race and gender.

In conclusion

In this analysis which focused on the range of relationships, perspectives and identities of sons, significant findings emerged from participants' narratives. First, sons described a spectrum of experiences of non-resident fathers, which included varying and shifting amounts of absence and presence. This raises questions about what Tracey Reynolds (1997:104) argues has been a disproportionate emphasis on "absent" black fathers. Second, sons exercised agency in discerning potential role models, with some asserting that the women in their lives were significant inspirations. This challenges the discourse on male role models and indicates that the influence and impact of single-parent mothers have been devalued. According to the sons' accounts, they were also able to discern between appropriate masculine identity spaces. Third, sons were imagining becoming different kinds of family men, as has been found in previous research (Wetherell and Edley 1999a; Langa 2010) having learned important lessons from experiences in their family of origin. Some sons explicitly stated an intention to be supportive fathers and of

having successful couple relationships in their domestic futures. In doing so they would defy expectations that a single-parent family is reproduced by children that grow up within them.

These findings counter dominant discourses and provide constructive insight into male children's experiences of single-mother family structure. They reveal the contradiction between intersectional social constructions of single mother-raised sons and their various realities. Intersectional imbalances of power mean single mothers and children have not been in the position to shape societal definitions of family structure. Moreover, experiences at the intersection of single-parent family structure, blackness, masculinity and youth have rarely been empirically explored in the British context. Sons of single black mothers are multiply-positioned across categories of difference, and Crenshaw argues (1989:140) that subjects who do not easily fit into dominant identity categories are often excluded from theory. This absence from knowledge traditions means it can be said that longstanding claims about their experiences have been largely unsubstantiated. Again, this demonstrates the urgency of a constructive and critical thought tradition on the intersection of single-parent family structure and gender.

Chapter 8. The Social Context of Inner London

This chapter broadens its scope, moving beyond inner worlds, mothers' and sons' gendered identities and parental relationships, to contextualize dyads within the social conditions of the city. It centralises mothers' and sons' perspectives on and experiences of their urban neighbourhoods and life in the city. As previously discussed, the role of wider social conditions has been overlooked in the discussion of mothers' and children's trajectories and outcomes. London is one of the most expensive (Cole 2019) cities in the world and one of the most unequal (Partington 2018) in Europe - its black single-mother households may be in a particularly precarious position. London schooling is uneven in quality (Hollingworth and Archer 2010) and the dubious exclusion practices of some institutions (Shand-Baptiste 2020) are becoming a broad concern. Street violence has been a problem (Whittaker and Densley 2019) in London amid an apparent lack of police protection in 'black neighbourhoods' (see Greenfield 2018). There have been claims that a 'social cleansing' of London is underway (Minton 2013; FocusE15 2019), with those in need of affordable accommodation being transplanted to cities and towns far away as gentrification gathers pace. Racism in its various forms is an enduring feature of London life and is on the rise in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum (Booth and Mohdin 2019). Participant mother Natalie, 35, remarked: "It's a struggle living in London, it's hard, and having black sons makes it harder because you know all the things that are against them". The chapter details some of their differential experiences and parts of the social backdrop in which mothering is done in London. While dyads had a variety of experiences within the city, much of these positive, I believe it is important to engage with their divergent experiences to illuminate the unusual and additional challenges they face, typically due to their intersectional locations at 'race', gender and class. This is because due to the interconnection of racism and single-parentism, family structure among black populations has long been used to explain unwanted outcomes or tragic events, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, rather than investigating the complex impacts of intersecting social inequalities on single black mother families. Identifying and naming the impacts of social inequalities could contribute to resistant knowledge of intersectional experiences of single-mother family structure, blackness, inner-city residence, and one-income households.

There is a number of potential topics on which this chapter could have focused to develop insight into dyads' experiences of London, such as mothers' and sons' working lives and the experience of securing affordable housing in a family-friendly neighbourhood. However, the chapter focuses on themes which emerged most strongly from the data and/or offered were most relevant to societal conversations about social problems. These were differential, often racialised, experiences of schooling, urban childhood, gentrification and racism in public space. In the first section of this chapter, the realities of London schooling are examined, showing the city's educational system is negotiated with less privilege and that inequitable institutional experiences are sometimes endured. The second section focuses on families' experiences of urban neighbourhoods, and how the nature of these experiences can work to limit physical and psychic freedoms for inner-city children and young people. The third analyses the impact of gentrification in London localities, specifically how this form of geographic change can generate difficult emotions and challenge residents' sense of belonging. The final section of the chapter focuses on mothers' and sons' experiences of everyday racism.

8.1 Navigating London schooling

Utilising educational opportunities was one of the main approaches taken by research participants in an attempt to overcome inequity. An educational desire (Mirza 2007, 2018a) was evident in mothers' achievements as student parents, as discussed in Chapter 6, and the desire on the part of sons to continue past compulsory education as university students. For these reasons, it is important to examine parts of participants' narratives which focused on challenging experiences of schooling.

Mothers and sons described limited and poor quality local school options (Reay 2007; Reay and Lucey 2003; Butler and Hamnett 2010), differential low expectations (Rollock *et al.* 2015; Gillborn *et al.* 2012; Gillborn 2007; Graham and Robinson 2004; Abbott 2002; Blair 2001; Bhopal 2018:76-83) and teaching staff that did not represent the ethnic diversity of London (Maylor *et al.* 2006; Gillborn 2007), which people perceived as significant to the nature of relationships between staff and students. This section analyses this and the ways participants responded to these conditions.

Single mother-son dyads had to successfully navigate the London 'school market', an "inequitable geography of schooling" (Hollingworth and Archer 2010:589). It has been asserted that narratives of parental school choice (Shimmon 2010) are misleading as research has shown that it is more privileged parents who possess such choice (Reay 2007:1191, 2017:171-3, 189-190; Benson,

Bridge, and Wilson 2015), while others must negotiate constraint (Butler and Hamnett 2010). Many of the mothers I spoke to were discerning in selecting secondary schools for their children; they were strategic choosers. There has been a perception that black mothers don't care about schooling, an erroneous assumption, as demonstrated in the literature (Cooper 2005; Byfield 2008:59-72; Archer 2010; Chapman and Bhopal 2013; Bhopal 2014; Rollock *et al.* 2015:43-60). Considering race, class and spatial inequalities mothers were aware of the pivotal nature of secondary school choice. Much like the mothers of colour with whom Thandeka K. Chapman and Kalwant Bhopal conducted research, many of these mothers understood how education could be life-changing (2013:574). As such, local schools were sometimes rejected in favour of more distant institutions that mothers perceived as superior for various reasons. Jazzy, 46, described choosing a secondary school in a suburban county that she perceived as "the right mix" (Rollock *et al.* 2015:43-60). She recalled reasoning with her son "I want you to mix with those sorts of people as well". Jeremiah, 22, mentioned making a 2-hour round trip each day to attend an academic mixed-comprehensive school, rather than single-sex options within close walking distance of home. Aaron, 25, also recalled travelling beyond his locality for schooling:

My mum didn't agree with the schools in Hackney in terms of the grades they were getting at the time, the effectiveness of the teaching ... And, at the time, a lot of the schools in Hackney were poor... so she was adamant that she wanted to get me out of Hackney to go to school... like it was very much, Hackney was here [*draws an imaginary circle with finger*] and it was that any decent school was outside of it. Aaron

This finding contradicts the idea that parents with fewer resources, positioned as working-class, tend to choose the nearest school for their children (Reay and Lucey 2010: 86-87). Rather than an emphasis on locality and community, mothers were more individual in their reasoning. This is perhaps best understood in the socio-historical context of migration (see Mirza 2018a). The transcendent potential of education is often instilled in the children of migrants, who in turn pass it down to their children (see Chapman and Bhopal 2013:574-575; Rollock *et al.* 2015). As Chapman and Bhopal (2013:574-575) found, "education was seen as a gateway to success, to greater social advantage and great privileges to ensure greater social mobility".

In this study, often the educational desire (Mirza 2007, 2018a) of these single mothers was tempered by constraint, in particular, the unequal spread of privilege (see Bhopal 2018). Like the black women making school choices in Cooper's research (2005), JJ, 50, described experiencing a disadvantage in the secondary school applications process:

It wasn't easy: some people literally moved houses. They sold their house just to make sure they were in the catchment area – people actually moved, or they rented a house nearer to the school so that they could get in, and once they were in, they went back to their house. But obviously, I didn't have that freedom, so all I could do was put his name down for the school; he didn't get the school ... *JJ*

As a social housing tenant and head of a one-income household, JJ knew that she had less resources than others in the struggle for a desired school place. For her, following Local Educational Authority rules meant losing in the highly-contested school lottery. JJ responded by rejecting offered alternatives and holding out on the waiting list for the school of choice, which eventually resulted in the offer of a place for her son. Being selective in school choice as a parent with fewer resources produced a greater uncertainty of outcome. This is well-illustrated in a vignette shared by Theresa. Concerned about the reputations of secondary schools in Tower Hamlets, Theresa, 60, described applying to a prestigious selective state school following the encouragement of her son's primary school headteacher. Her son passed the admissions exam and was invited to interview. Interviewed separately, Theresa indicates how her intersectional position seemed to influence the interviewer's assessment of her son's situation:

...the first question was: "Are you married?"

"No."

"So how would he – his homework, how would that be done? Where would he study?"

"That's fine, he's got that support".

He didn't get in.

Theresa

Theresa's description of her parent interview is an example of interworkings of sexism, classism and single-parentism. There is sexist single-parentism in the assumption that a female parent cannot support her child's schoolwork and learning, and classism in the implied question about how conducive the home environment is to learning. While it is not known why Theresa's son was not admitted to the school, the interviewer's line of questioning is discriminatory.

Natalie, 35, a secondary school teacher, was aware of the judgements made within schools about parents positioned in categories of difference and was sympathetic to the parents she had met as an educator in East and North East London.

It's not that all of these parents don't care that's *not* the case. I see so many parents who care but don't know what to do. If you're not schooled in the educational British system or even the most *current* version of the British educational system, how can you know what to do? I'm lucky that I know what to do because I'm *in* it. I've got friends who'll phone me...but if you don't have a network... who do you phone? *Natalie*

This is an important question. Parents have varying access to information about the education system and what takes within schools (Ball and Vincent 1998). It could be said that this knowledge is classed and raced. Access to knowledge about the English education system and its inner workings can be critical for some black parents, especially because, historically, black children have endured inequitable institutional experiences in English schools (as discussed in Swann 1985; Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe [2018]1985:61-82; Blair 2001; Reay 2017:108-9; Akala 2018:65-87). Two of the ten sons, Lenny, 20, and Jeremiah, understood the nature of the difficulties they experienced in primary school through the lens of racial inequity. In the following quotation this is described by Jeremiah:

There was a lot of institutionalised racism, a lot of bullying from teachers. I didn't actually enjoy primary school, I felt like I was on a battlefield, and it was very strange. A lot of different things happened with teachers undermining my potential, constantly belittling some of the experiences that I wanted to have in terms of student leadership positions, or being involved in different activities within the school community, and all of that culminated in my mum deciding to take me out of that school. *Jeremiah*

Similarly, Lenny spoke at length about a difficult time at primary school. He described being constantly blamed, punished and excluded, having been labelled as 'the problem boy'. The distinctive and complex nature of black youths' schooling experiences in English institutions has been recorded in research (Blair 2001; Graham and Robinson 2004; Rollock *et al.* 2015:72-74). The mothers of Jeremiah and Lenny intervened in both situations and decided to remove their sons from these schools. There has been a history of mothers of colour advocating for their children within schools and against local educational policies (Coard 2005b[1971]; Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]:61-82; Archer 2010; Chapman and Bhopal 2013; Bhopal 2014). Lenny's mother, Alice, 46, provided a different perspective on Lenny's experience. She described regular telephone calls from the school, the classroom observations she did and the school meetings. All

this cost Alice time, energy and emotion adding to her parenting labour. In the following quotation Alice describes the impact:

It is a long haul when you are doing that yourself. You might have family around you, but ultimately, it's just you... you go to bed tired and then it's another battle... It can weigh you down, and it has an impact on how you view your child. *Alice*

Another mother, Audrey, 47, described ultimately resolving to face the powerful institution of the school alone:

My son was excluded... I'd be up and down the school all the time, but it was always just me... And then it got so bad that I thought, "Okay, let me involve his father" and that didn't go so well... So, I just always have kind of gotten on with it because when you are the mother, you are faced with it every single day... *Audrey*

Teacher practices that could be characterised as racist were described by some participants. Ann, 51, spoke about one of her son's teachers who ignored students of colour in the classroom. When Ann's son raised the issue with his teacher privately, suggesting it was racist, he was punished. Ann contacted the school the same evening and the punishment was overturned. Confident and effective in raising concerns with the school, Ann can be placed among the minoritised parents with professional backgrounds using their skills and knowledge to advocate for their children and make effective interventions, whose experiences have been explored in research (Byfield 2008:67-69; Archer 2010; Gillborn *et al.* 2012; Chapman and Bhopal Chapman 2014:497-498; Rollock *et al.* 2015:105-111). But parents should not be in the position of having to intervene and advocate because their children are being treated differently. Participant narratives show this is one way that race can change the experiences of black parents and students.

Black teaching staff at varying levels of education were mentioned by a portion of sons as more supportive. The results of research on the ethnic matching of school staff and students have been mixed (Maylor 2009), although there is evidence of some benefits for students (see Byfield 2008:81-86). Half of the sample of sons spoke of valuing the presence of black teaching staff. Jeremiah, whose experiences were described above, was moved to a new primary school with a more diverse teaching staff. In the following quotation, he described the effect he believed this had:

[B]eing able to see key people that I could identify with... that was really inspiring for me. The head teacher was black, the deputy head was black. In terms of the representation element, I remember that was so important and powerful...most of the teachers believed in my potential, so instead of my potential being suppressed, I was able to flourish...

Jeremiah

There is the notion that African-Caribbean heritage teachers are needed as role models, but research by Maylor (2009) suggests this may be a reductive assumption. In this study, what came through clearly from participants' narrations was that staff of African and Caribbean heritage seemed more likely to encourage and affirm black students and less inclined to label and dismiss any black student displaying challenging behaviour. The following quotation from Vince illustrates this:

There was one teacher... she was Deputy Head, and she had my back since the day I got into her school. So, throughout school she would be like 'Vince, you can do this, Vince, you are brilliant but your behaviour doesn't show that', etcetera. She sort of made it so that she was my teacher in year five because she wanted to make sure that she could essentially be there with me, be my direct contact.

Vince

There was a sense that differential treatment was more like to be experienced with white teachers. Both mothers and sons described what they felt were negative assumptions of boys' work ethic, behaviour or academic ability. Some sons spoke of a sense of being positioned as inferior. Samson, 21, recalled:

One teacher said, 'What is it with you kids? Why can't you be well-behaved like the boys from Eton?' We were the top-set science class, and he said that to us and then left us right before our GCSEs.

Samson

A belief existed among participants that it was difficult for white English staff to feel genuinely connected with youth of African Caribbean heritage. Teachers coming from more ethnically homogeneous parts of the country to teach in the capital may have had little experience with diversity and urban multi-culture. Previous research (Picower 2009) has shown that holding racist beliefs does not deter teachers from working in multicultural schools and studies have documented the complex nature of black-student-white-teacher relations (see Blair 2001; Graham and Robinson 2004). Teacher knowledge of black populations may be more informed by intersectional media representations which remain distorted and disproportionately negative

(Lawrence 1982b; hooks 2004; Ofcom 2018). These can perpetuate and combine stereotypes about blackness, low-income families, single-mother households and inner-city life.

Participants referred to dynamics between white teachers and diverse school populations in their accounts. Juliet, 50, a secondary school teacher, spoke of observing such dynamics at her workplace, taking the time to describe one white colleague in particular: “She has no connection with the kids, it’s like ‘Why are you here? Go and teach in a private school with white kids’ ”. Similarly, Samson asserted:

I do think that there is a problem nowadays in teaching whereby a lot of new teachers don’t really understand the students that they are in charge of. *Samson*

This issue is well-illustrated in the following quotation from Santiago, 20, describing an instance of how the behaviour of black students was misjudged:

[I]n school I’m arguing with a couple of my friends about Pokémon and the teacher’s coming up like it’s a fight, and I’m just like, ‘*We’re just talking, we’re just having a discussion*, what’s the issue!’...She’s like, ‘you were shouting and I thought’...We’re like, ‘No, we’re just having a *conversation*’. We’re shouting, making noise. But in school you really need to learn how to hold that down, I learned that from primary school...because it’s used as a weapon against you many a time. To get ahead in the educational world you have to be on the cusp of masculinity and femininity...

Santiago

From Santiago’s view, a certain level of self-discipline (Foucault 1977) was required in order to avoid sanction and be viewed as a ‘good student’. Studies have shown that the bodies of black students are subject to close monitoring and over-discipline (Graham and Robinson 2004; Kulz 2015).

In 1985 The Swann Report acknowledged but also reproduced negative assumptions about African-Caribbean heritage inner-city students. It stated that student-teacher relations–

... may be subconsciously influenced by stereotypes, negative or patronising views of their abilities and potential, which may prove a self-fulfilling prophecy, and can be seen as an unintentional form of racism. (Swann 1985:xix)

However, in its later mentions of inner-city residence and single-parent households, the report later draws on crude measures of geographic location and family structure as variables which it implicates in so-called 'educational underachievement'. This part of the report's claims would serve to legitimate the very stereotypes and "patronising views" it initially appeared to be problematising. The MP Diane Abbott, who has run a campaign entitled *London Schools and the Black Child*, has discussed (2002) how there has been a disproportionate emphasis on the attitudes and actions of students racialised as black, rather a problematising of cultures within educational institutions and the attitudes and actions school staff. Participants perceived some teachers to be working with an unacknowledged bias. For them, this was evident in practices of stereotyping, the withholding of educational opportunities, and insensitive remarks.

Some participant sons recalled observing some peers veering off course. Sons saw these students as receiving less support from the school, as they were steered in directions with less opportunity. Vince, 22, recalled, "a lot of my friends, they were all told to aspire for five Cs and to go to college... but they didn't realise that it meant you just closed a lot of doors". At another point in our interview he went into detail, describing the process of disengagement of some of these students:

I felt like a lot of boys just started to rebel against the system, you are like, 'You know what? They don't even care about me. This could give me three C grades? I am not going'. And then they are more inclined to then find comfort somewhere else because 'The education system doesn't want me, they are kicking me out of every class, they are telling me that I can't get As, or A stars. And I can't even see where it is taking me anyway. So why am I going to school?' Like I have friends that are here selling drugs, doing certain things... And I thought like, that's something that schools don't understand, you can't expel everyone and then wonder why they all are in prison.

Vince

This section has illustrated some dyads' distinctive experiences of schooling at their intersectional location of family structure, race, gender, geography and class. In the competitive London 'school market' dyads had difficulty accessing schools with a strong reputation for different reasons. Some participants' narratives suggest sons were always valued equally as well as beliefs that black school staff were more invested in their outcomes. If sons had difficult or differential experiences and it was mothers who were in the default position, as single parents, to intervene. Resolving sons' situations required skill and tenacity. In Theresa's vignette, there was evidence

of a school staff member making negative assumptions about the life of a student from a single-mother family.

These findings indicate why some at the intersection of blackness, family structure and geography may experience divergent educational outcomes. As discussed in Chapter 2 discourse about black people's historical experiences of schooling in England (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]:70-80; Akala 2018:65-88; Oppong 2019) are increasingly emerging, providing vital context to sometimes differential levels of achievement. Due to negative assumptions perpetuated by intersectional representations, problems experienced by single black mothers and children are naturalised rather than problematised and interrogated. The fact unequal outcomes of schooling continue, in different forms, to this day, suggests that improvement cannot be expected without institutional and systemic change.

8.2 Realities of black urban childhood

In this section, the ways mothers and sons experienced their London localities are examined. In the discussion that follows some of the ways urban neighbourhoods can create constraints are illustrated.

Some families lived in or close to geographies with reputations as challenging spaces. During interviews, some of the mothers and sons referred to local issues such as street robbery (Hymas 2019) and violence (Younge 2017), territoriality (Pickering, Kintrea and Bannister 2012), road mentality (Gunter 2008; Bakkali 2019) and racialised police stop and search practices (Dodd 2019) as a concern. While black middle-class nuclear families may have the material resources to strategically avoid urban neighbourhoods with reputations for being difficult (Rollock *et al.* 2015:59-60), for single-parent women the choice of residential environment was generally limited by financial constraint due to their one-income households. For some participants, this constraint was exacerbated by London's changing housing market (Minton 2017) and the increasing lack of affordable housing (Watt 2015; Hardy and Gillespie 2016) in the context of gentrification, which is discussed in the following section.

Some mother participants expressed anxiety about undesirable influences nearby and the possible effects on their child, like mothers in previous research (Brodsky 1999; Jarrett and Jefferson 2010; Reynolds 2013), while sons described weariness about the risk of violence (Jarrett and Jefferson 2010:26-28). Referring to the important role played by his grandparents in

his childhood and youth, Harlem-King, 19, remarked “I don’t know if I’d be here”, imagining a different outcome for himself without them. I asked why:

Because our estate was really rough, and my primary school was rough and my secondary school was rough, and the people that lingered there were rough...I don't think that without the support of my grandparents and my great-grandparents while I was growing up, I would have avoided that...I don't trust that my mum alone could have saved me from some of the things that were going on in my immediate surroundings.

Harlem-King

One practice used to mitigate risks associated with the neighbourhood environment was containment (Jarrett and Jefferson 2010:30-32). In the context of neighbourhood risk, children were more likely to be indoors, if not engaged in a structured or supervised activity, such as extra-curricular activities or visiting friends. This contrasts with discourses on childhood that promote play which is unstructured, outdoors and ideally within nature (see Hyndman 2019), and is viewed as important to children’s healthy development (Bento and Dias 2017). Contemporary childhood in the UK increasingly involves relatively more time indoors or being supervised (Hyndman 2019) due to parental anxiety about child safety (Valentine and McKendrick 1997). However, participant accounts indicated that the complex risks of racialisation exacerbated the concerns of some single mothers and often caused a sense of unease for sons themselves, illustrating the ways race, gender, youth and geography coalesce in generating a distinct experience of urban childhood.

Participants’ narratives highlighted the distinctive nature of English childhoods at intersections of the inner city, blackness, youth and masculinity. Barry, 20, described his childhood like this:

I just went to school, came home, went to church on Sundays, and went to the local shop. Basically, if I didn't have to be out, I wouldn't be out.

Barry

Due to the nature of the urban environment, there was little possibility for exploration, spontaneity or adventure. Jazzy mentioned that her son wasn’t allowed to venture beyond the confines of their front garden to play with neighbourhood children. Ann described the parameters she set:

He could go to specific places, to friends' houses, to events, to the park at the bottom of our road, but I didn't agree to generally wandering around streets and he had to come home promptly from school.

Ann

Natalie mentioned a view shared between herself and two close friends – also single mothers of sons – that “we’ve got black boys, we can’t just leave them on the streets of Hackney to play”. Natalie was part of a significant portion of the mothers who spoke at length about neighbourhood violence and the increased concern for her son’s safety this had caused. As a secondary school teacher, Natalie had additional knowledge about tragic incidents involving local youth. This awareness understandably intensified her anxiety:

I invested so much of my time and money in my son because I couldn't let him just play out, because it worried me too much. And I couldn't guarantee his safety in raising him where I did - boys kept getting killed, and three of my students were murdered. I can't have him on those same streets, with the same people around... some were never caught.

Natalie

It is important to highlight here that some London neighbourhoods affected by street violence seem to suffer a lack of police protection (see Smith and Hughes 2019). It is perhaps partly in light of this that mothers took action in various ways to protect their sons. Besides containment, other strategies used by mothers to keep their sons safe included designating their homes as open to sons' friends to keep them all off the streets, maintaining a structured routine, and keeping sons busy with extra-curricular activities, outings and trips. As highlighted in the above quote from Natalie, this costs mothers time, energy and money, adding to the demands of their role as the sole or main parent.

Previous research (Brodsky 1999; Jarrett and Jefferson 2010) has observed the ways single black mothers take various actions to prevent undesirable outcomes which they have seen occur within their residential locality (Brodsky 1999:153), which this finding in my study supports. The perspective that the life trajectories of inner-city, black youth are determined by the perceived deviance in their geographic environments (see Howarth 2002) is a reductive assumption that denies the agency of young people and their parents. Lenny asserted that his mother was instrumental in his surviving local conditions:

I'm a young black boy, I grew up in the heart of Tottenham. The 2011 riots were right outside my window. I've seen police speed past, and I've seen police chase people. I'm friends with gang members, so all of that is around me, but I don't take part in it because of my mum. I can stand proud and say, "Yeah, I'm a strong black man," thanks to my mum.

Lenny

Lenny demonstrates a clear awareness of the negative meanings possibly imposed on him due to intersectional location at 'race', gender and geography. Seemingly speaking back to dominant assumptions he makes a counter-argument first, asserting that he is not shaped by any deviance within his neighbourhood and second, in emphasising that his single mother was an effective parent, able to steer him in the right direction. While it is not known if Lenny was using the opportunity to pay tribute to his mother and address stereotypes, it was clear from Lenny's broader account he was critical of the difficult elements of his neighbourhood and had not succumbed to such influences despite being impacted by them.

Territoriality (Kintrea 2008; Pickering, Kintrea, and Bannister 2012) had been a source of concern for a small number of the young people I spoke to. Sons said the awareness of ongoing local conflicts created an air of threat and a sense of unease (Smith and Hughes 2019) as they moved through certain parts of the city. There was a sense among some participants that their intersectional identities as young black marked them as potential participants to others. Lenny, who during both of his interviews spoke at length about these issues locally, expressed his frustration about the sense of danger he felt in travelling into a nearby neighbourhood where his rugby club was based, due to territorial rivalry:

I live in Tottenham. I play rugby in Enfield. So this means just because I like to play rugby and I've got a hobby, I have to fear for my life. *Lenny*

As a "hyper-criminalised" group (Gilroy 1982; Williams and Clarke 2018; Andrews 2019), young black men have long been cast as perpetrators in discourses on inner-city life, creating a "folk devil" (Cohen 1972) on to whom fears about safety and social order can be projected. What is underreported and less discussed are statistics that indicate that black people in England are one of the groups most likely to experience crime as victims (ONS 2021). Of people aged over 16 reporting they had been a victim of crime from 2019 to 2019, 15% were black, the second largest group and 20% were mixed-heritage. This overrepresentation signals unique vulnerabilities among people of colour, including youth, that have either been overlooked or distorted. Indeed, most of the men I spoke to for this study, had experienced crime either personally or vicariously.

Among the sons of the 16 households represented in the study, a sizeable portion had experienced street robbery. Creatively adapting to the nature of the London landscape, sons used an agency in developing protective techniques. Aaron described himself as "streetwise" and

"vigilant", skills he said were honed by travelling to school independently with friends from age ten. Describing his methods to prevent his phone from being stolen he said:

I would put my phone in my sock, or my phone in my boxers to make sure that if you did get 'searched', then you weren't going to get robbed. *Aaron*

Other tactics described by mothers and sons included dressing completely in black to avoid colours associated with gang affiliation, sitting downstairs on public buses and refusing eye contact with youths in the street. Vignettes by sons demonstrated how experiences of violence and intimidation could be completely arbitrary. Lenny told me he had been robbed several times. "It was bound to happen!" he'd said - I asked why he thought so:

You can be someone that has no clue about gang crime, has no clue about who's who, or what's what. You don't need to be involved... You just gotta be black [*pause*] and that's it. *Lenny*

Single mothers residing with their children in neighbourhoods perceived as challenging seemed to try to make their homes an oasis for the family. Previous research has found that home can be a haven for families in similar circumstances (Jarrett and Jefferson 2010:31-33). Family rituals seemed to create a predictable rhythm to family life. The rituals mentioned by participants included movie nights, game nights, church attendance and visiting relatives. Creating stability was mentioned as a priority by some mothers. Ann said she wanted her son to have "a positive childhood." She explained how she approached trying to create this:

I tried to keep things calm, balanced, and educational: trips, holidays, museums, days out, and social interaction. We did lots of art and black history projects at home and on weekends we went to festivals, parks and museums. *Ann*

Other participants also mentioned trips to museums, parks, the theatre, galleries, restaurants and cultural events during childhood. This was one way in which families were able to enjoy the privilege of living in England's capital. A large portion of mothers provided opportunities for their children to develop cultural capital (Moore 2008), seemingly as a practical response to racism and other social inequalities. Some of the women were concerned that their sons develop the 'right taste', gaze and poise, in the belief it would enable them to navigate London's various institutions and spaces with ease. Harlem-King reflected that this cultivation (Lareau 2003; Rollock *et al.* 2015) seemed to differentiate him from his peers.

Home was really good at making sure that I had access to art and history and culture
... I was just a little bit more well-rounded than some of the other kids. *Harlem-King*

Natalie described taking her children to different spaces in London, to “places where they might be the only black face and seeing how they coped with that”. She also mentioned the importance of her children “experiencing things rather than having stuff”. Ann spoke of taking her son to professional spaces such as conferences “so he learned different social settings at a young age and to interact with lots of different children”. To be clear, mothers did not believe possessing this capital could protect their sons from experiencing racism. Their perspectives seemed to be that possessing ‘something extra’ would create opportunities for their sons in enabling them to move smoothly between London’s varied social worlds.

This section has examined some of the ways of experiences of motherhood, childhood and youth are distinctive at the intersection of race, family structure, age, geography and gender. I have focused on this finding to highlight the complex nature of additional challenges faced by some dyads. Some participants described a sense of danger for sons in their locality, and there was a perspective that being a racialised subject increased that risk. In the context of these conditions, it was important to mothers that sons were kept safe, had a variety of experiences and were able to move between different spaces in the city.

The above analysis shows the difficult nature of some of the neighbourhoods participants resided in sometimes placed a variety of additional emotional, psychic and practical demands on mothers and sons. However, such experiences of urban English childhood are under-theorised and rarely addressed in parenting discourse as they occur at neglected points of the intersection. As discussed in Chapter 3, some scholars suggest (Crenshaw 1989:140, 150-152; Walby, Armstrong and Strid 2012:226) that the multi-categorical location of some intersectional subjects means their situations are more likely to be unattended to.

Typical responses to the unusual divergent outcomes have been to pathologise black youth and/or blame single-parent family structure among black communities, due to negative reactions to difference. This is how certain social issues have been naturalised and depoliticised, rather than problematised and interrogated. However, participants' narratives indicate that life trajectories are *not* necessarily determined by living in difficult neighbourhoods. A more

constructive focus would be an exploration of the question, what would make some inner-city neighbourhoods safer?

8.3 The hidden injuries of gentrification

A significant portion of participants lived in gentrifying geographies. The term gentrification describes when there is a flow of white middle-class residents into low-income often diverse urban neighbourhoods; the space gradually changes culturally and aesthetically to conform to middle-class taste, and consequentially long-term residents, often minoritised groups, are forced out of the area as it becomes expensive (Florida 2015). A considerable portion of participants spoke with frustration, and often emotively about the gentrification of their London towns. Some of the participants concerned about gentrification lived in East London boroughs which bordered Newham, home of the 2012 Olympics site. These boroughs and neighbourhoods were undergoing sweeping change and widening inequalities (Watt 2013), particularly in the availability of affordable housing (see Hardy and Gillespie 2016). As Londoners with relatively less material resources and less social power, participants seemed to experience these geographic changes as disempowering and marginalising, as the London locality they knew as home dramatically and rapidly shifted in character and composition. Participants had a unique, less-heard perspective on gentrification as intersectional subjects located at axes of race, class and geography.

Those concerned about gentrification described the pace and scale of change in their neighbourhood as a shock. Natalie described the change in Hackney as having taken place "very quickly and without authorization". What Natalie implies about the absence of resident consensus is key. One prerequisite of urban social justice is that residents have control over their "lived space" (Uitermark 2012:201); an inclusive city would arguably be characterised by general consent for the nature and scale of neighbourhood change (Amin 2006). Some participants described a sense of psychological loss of their neighbourhoods, well-illustrated in the following quotation from Michael, 39, who had a period away living in Scotland:

I'm an East Ender... but being there now, they're not my people anymore, it's full of hipsters and millionaires. There are no local pubs anymore, it's not the place where I grew up ... the people that are still here, we don't know where to go ... it's not home any more ... so I guess when I moved I became part of that transient population that keeps moving...

Michael

As mentioned, one feature of gentrification is the change in demographic (Freeman and Braconi 2007:39), in the influx of more privileged and affluent residents. This shift served to disrupt people's sense of belonging. Describing his experiences in the milieu of Hackney, Harlem-King remarked, "I have certain people staring at me like I'm not supposed to be here". The following quotation from Samson picks up this theme:

...there's an element of us that just wants to belong, we want to know that we're accepted and I think when you step out of your front door and you feel a sense of not only like an inability to be accepted, but actual rejection ... there's an element of yourself which becomes a bit lost, a bit unsure, I think you feel isolated. *Samson*

It has been suggested that in gentrifying geographies, 'communities of colour' are "much valued as a kind of social wallpaper, but no more" (Butler 2003:2484). There was a sense among participants that white middle-class residents enjoyed aspects of the cultural landscape but were not interested in engaging with long-term residents, preferring to observe ethnic communities in a voyeuristic way:

... they're moving to Dalston [East London] and they treat it like a zoo... the last time we had human zoos were in the 19th century, it was horrible then and it's horrible now. *Michael*

As previously mentioned, there is evidence that urban residents living in proximity to those who look down on them can harm health and well-being (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010:168-169). Surveying numerous empirical studies, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2010:168) found that people living in spaces with fewer people like themselves had worse health; they were more likely to experience mental distress, "heart disease" and low "birthweight". They argue this is explained by "the psychological effects of stigma" (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010:169).

Two of the changing spaces participants lived in were Hackney and Tottenham – geographies that could be characterised as 'black neighbourhoods' (Reynolds 2013). Doreen Massey (2002, quoted in Kirkland 2008:19) suggested that a lot of the debate around gentrification is actually "a coded reference to the contestation of black people and white people for urban space". Speaking of the difficulties in different social groups attempting to share geographic space, Harlem-King observed "it's a power dynamic thing". People mentioned the stalwart institutions of neighbourhoods such as ethnic food shops and 'black nightclubs' disappearing. Tracey Reynolds suggests (2013:492) that for young people of Caribbean heritage, 'black neighbourhoods' within

English inner-cities “represented a key site of identity formation” in the context of their experiences of exclusion. Reynolds found (2013:491) “people drawing on social resources that exist there to generate acceptance, belonging and social progress”. There was the perception among some participants concerned about gentrification that spaces were being sanitised of blackness. As ‘black neighbourhood’ establishments were symbolic representations of cultural identity this felt personal and emotive. In the literature (Parkeh 2015; Drew 2000) it has been asserted that the spatial domination of white middle classes in changing localities reflects broader power relations, reproducing and exacerbating inequalities (Drew 2000:105) at the intersection of race, class and geography.

Some participants spoke of forms of spatial domination by new residents. One example of this was the development of a new “Leyton Village” described by Margaret with bewilderment. Margaret, 51, observed how new amenities predominantly served the interests of more privileged residents, a common feature of gentrification recorded in research (Drew 2000; Leslie and Catungal 2012). Jay was more conflicted about the transformation of his neighbourhood. He said he could see both perspectives – in his imagined future he would prefer to raise his children in the neighbourhood in its new guise, but he also was sympathetic to friends of his who had been displaced or were struggling to keep a foothold in the neighbourhood.

Displacement pressure, the fear of being forced to move on while witnessing the disintegration of the social fabric locally, created the sense of an uncertain future. Natalie spoke of her family moving to a new home four times while her son was growing up, in search of affordable but adequately-sized family accommodation. At the time of her last interview, her struggle to balance these criteria was still ongoing.

The psychologically troubling and materially disruptive effects of gentrification can be seen as a form of social harm (Hillyard and Tombs 2007:17) to long-term residents with less power, as it generates social conditions that are negatively impactful. As mentioned, neighbourhoods of minoritised communities are often sites of survival and resistance (Drew 2000) as well as a “symbol of belonging” and identity. These spaces offer people stability, social life and a sense of personal control (Drew 2000; Slater 2010; Reynolds 2013). The asymmetry of power between race and class groups in processes of neighbourhood change tends to position original residents in a passive role (Leslie and Catungal 2012:113) in the transformation of geographies that were regarded as home. There seemed to be an underlying sense of being devalued among some participants. Samson, another Hackney resident, said about the neighbourhood change he had

experienced, "I feel hurt, I feel a sense of loss because it happened drastically". He went on to explain:

I think you've gone from having people seeing themselves represented in their local communities to a sense of social isolation... the effect that has on someone's mental health, the idea that where they called home five years ago, now isn't reflective of their experience makes them question themselves... I mean, it just marginalises the experience of people that have lived in that part of the city. Their culture isn't represented there anymore... I don't think people communicate enough about what the effects of it are...

Samson

He later went on to describe what he thought these were:

I don't know how to describe the emotion that you go through, obviously a sense of anger, you feel a sense of frustration, but you also feel powerless. You feel like, "Oh well, this has been taken out of my hands, someone with more money than me has decided they just want to take something that was actually really important to me and make it something that I can no longer access, and I can't do anything about it".

Samson

Samson's words show that what "some long-term residents suffer from is not a lack of capital but ... a lack of power and control" (DeFilippis 2004, quoted in Slater 2010:307). The emotional and psychological impact of gentrification has been less attended to (Amin 2006:1016). As a poet, Harlem-King told me he'd used performances to stand up and speak back to issues around gentrification. In his comments he emotively evoked a notion of neighbourhood death, summing up his feelings this way:

Hackney will always be my home, but it's like when somebody dies and you put them in the ground, and maggots start to eat them. They [the incomers] are the maggots and the body is Hackney.

Harlem-King

There is a notion that intersectional subjects hold unique and valuable insight that is important for envisioning equality (Nash 2008:3) and research participants' narratives on gentrification are an example of this. They shed light on how sons and mothers experienced shifts in the landscape of their London locality psychologically and emotionally. They described feelings of devaluation, powerlessness and marginality. For participants, there was a sense of being increasingly viewed

as out of place in the geographic space they called home and from which they had drawn their identity and a sense of belonging. Participants' accounts suggest gentrification was experienced as a form of domination, creating a sense of uncertainty for them as members of one-income households and a racialised group with less power. It could be said that the lack of control of relatively less-powerful residents over their lived space is naturalised at the societal level due to historical patterns of domination involving land and space.

Such geographic change can have the effect of reinforcing and exacerbating the vulnerabilities of under-considered and under-represented intersectional subjects such as black inner-city single-mother families, on a material as well as a psychological level. These invisible dynamics of urban change are rarely acknowledged. Gentrification continues to spread across London to neighbourhoods with migrant, minoritised and/or working-class communities, exacerbating social divides and entrenching racialised asymmetries of power. This data shows how some single mothers and their children interpret and experience gentrification as unjust. A resistant knowledge project on the intersection of single-parent family structure, blackness and geography could include a critical examination of the impacts of gentrification on life chances and well-being.

8.4 Negotiating racism in public space

The final section of this chapter demonstrates the ways distinctive experiences of urban public space are generated by the interworking of race, gender, and class. The narratives of research participants show negative social meanings of their intersectional identities sometimes shaped their experiences of public space. This impact of this created additional forms of labour and constraint in sons' and mothers' double consciousness (DuBois 1903[1994]), impression management (Goffman 1959) through image control (see Dow 2016:179-181) and self-surveillance and self-discipline (Foucault 1977).

Both mothers and sons recounted racial microaggressions (see Huber and Solórzano 2015) and experiences shaped by 'unconscious bias' (Booth and Mohdin 2018). Some mother participants shared vignettes of the public guarding wallets and bags when close to them. Juliet described her response to this: "I've been in a shop and seen women do that and I've laughed. In my head, I'm like, 'If only you knew, I'm probably earning more than what you do, I don't want your money.'" Juliet's use of the phrase "if only you knew" is important. Despite holding a 'respectable' social role as a teacher, her body is not read by some in these ways. This indicates how the blanket

devaluation of blackness suggests that no form of respectability or achievement will be enough to protect individuals against racism. Bethea explains this:

You may become a wealthy and highly educated black woman but still when you're seen, you're seen as everything that a white supremacist society associates with being a black woman: poor, uneducated, promiscuous, unattractive, sassy, loud ... Unacceptable. (Bethea 2021:180)

Natalie – also a teacher – described similar experiences. Comparing her experiences in these public spaces with those of her son, she said “I get followed around shops still, but not in the way that he does”. Natalie suggests that her son’s experiences of racial profiling are worse than hers due to racialised gender. While this may be true at an individual level, research evidence (Booth and Mohdin 2018) shows that BAME women in England are slightly more likely to report being racially profiled in retail space than men.

Some mothers hoped that impression management through image control could work to protect their sons from microaggressions and racial profiling. The idea that self-presentation and choice of dress could negate negative readings of the black male body was a theme repeated across different narratives of sons and mothers. Strategic dress as a protective strategy was described by some participants. JJ said she often warned her son about his aesthetic choices, due to her fears about racial profiling by police:

I always had to keep on saying to him ... “You’ve got to be careful. If you want to dress a particular way, fine, but just remember ‘you fit a description’ ... be prepared that you’re going to get stopped”. JJ

Due to tropes of black criminality (Gilroy 1982; Williams and Clarke 2018; Andrews 2019) and black masculinity being represented as synonymous with a controlling image of the ‘thug’ (Dow 2016), it was regarded as risky to dress in clothing that had negative connotations. For some participants, there was a notion that certain items of clothing were best avoided. This is a differential experience unique to the intersection of blackness, masculinity, youth and aesthetics. The following quotation from Audrey provides detail on this:

Unfortunately, my son just fit into the stereotype, just in how he wanted to identify himself. It's something that I really disliked, but he liked – and I stopped buying them for him – he liked to wear the hoodies, he liked to wear the baseball caps and the little hats, and the hoodies and the loose trousers and stuff – he liked that style ... He spoke in certain ways and acted in certain ways, and kind of really identified with that. We went into the shopping centre once, and he was asked to leave. He was with me and he was asked to leave the shopping centre by the security guys because he was wearing a hoodie and stuff. I did challenge that... I'm sure that that might have been an experience he's had before. *Audrey*

There are three things I want to highlight in this quotation. First, Audrey alludes to a parent/child struggle over her son's choice of dress. Her reasons for concern about and rejection of the aesthetic style through which her son expresses identity are not stated, but it is somewhat clear she is anxious about what the can style can signify and wants to protect her son. What can be interpreted as Audrey upholding unfair judgements, can also be seen as the practical response of a concerned parent. Previous research has found Image management (Dow 2016:179-181) is done by African-American mothers raising sons in environments in which black male youth are not viewed as "good kids" due to racism. Dow found that African-American mothers encouraged sons to conform to conventional standards of dress "for their own safety" (2016:180). Nicola Rollock and her colleagues (2015:129) also observed black parents of sons negotiating the issue of socially acceptable dress in an English context. Second, a vignette justifies Audrey's stance - her son suffered a form of misrecognition in being viewed as suspicious and excluded from a public place. Third, in challenging the treatment of her son by security, Audrey does a distinctive and additional yet hidden form of parental labour, unique to the intersection of parenting and race, which is not dissimilar to forms of anti-racist advocacy. This additional labour, exclusive to parents of racialised children has been identified in previous studies (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]:61-82; Chapman and Bhopal 2013; Bhopal 2014). This is another way racism works to create a differential experience of motherhood for black single-parent women.

In a joint interview with Alice and her son Lenny, Lenny recounted some recent experiences:

Lenny: This happened when I went on my interview because it was smart/casual dress ... I've gone to the café afterwards just to get a coffee and there was a guy in there and he's like, "Oh you're looking very smart! Are you going to court?"

Miranda: What, a random stranger said that?

Lenny: A random stranger.

Alice: Didn't someone call you a n***** the other day?

Lenny: No that was a couple of months ago. I was coming out of the train station. I was on my phone, and some guy was walking in front of me. He said: "move away n*****, what are you trying to do – rob me?" ...

The experiences Lenny shared are an example of unusual and unwanted experiences which occur intersection of blackness, masculinity, youth and the inner city. It shows how some black youth may experience public space in London differently. Arguably, such an incident would not happen to an unsuspecting white youth. The social location of the capital of England is an important context here, as it is a social milieu in which the legitimate body which is viewed as respectable is white, middle-class and de-sexualised (Skeggs:1997:82).

For Audrey, it was important in this context that parents of young people racialised as black prepared them psychologically to be able to deflect the possible impacts of everyday racism:

I think there is a need to think 'what values am I instilling in my children?' and 'what sort of sense of self-worth?' So that when they do go out into society – especially young men - when they walk into a shop, and people do a double take, they have to be mindful of the perception that people will have of them but not let it affect them.

Audrey

What Audrey describes refers to how at the intersection of blackness, parenting and western society, the social conditions demand further labour for parents of racialised children. This has been demonstrated in a study by Gunaratnam with British Muslim mothers in the aftermath of the 2005 suicide bombings in London (2013), which found that women's protective responses to racism and islamophobia could be characterised as "inoculation" (Gunaratnam 2013:258, 259). This involved "educating and preparing [their children] to live in a racist world" by pre-emptively building up children's "resistance and resilience" (Gunaratnam 2013:259). In this study, similar actions of mothers were analysed in Chapter 5. These findings show that the workings of interconnected social forces mean many black and brown parents feel they have little choice but to socialise their children in preparation for discrimination based on skin colour.

Many sons were self-conscious of the negative ways they might be perceived. With this clear awareness, they demonstrated a form of double consciousness (Du Bois 1903[1994]:2), “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others”, in seeing themselves through the eyes of the dominant group. Concern about the negative interpretation of their bodies and behaviour meant some sons engaged in self-surveillance and self-discipline (Foucault 1977) in order to appear non-threatening. Again, this placed a constraint on the personal freedoms of these young people, creating what can be understood as “docile bodies” (Foucault 1977) to reassure others. The following quotation from Vince describes this:

I do my best to convey myself in a positive light ... And that's partly to do with the pressure of being a black man in London. You are constantly hyper-aware of if might people view you as walking too close, that's something I'm very aware of because it's like, “Do they see me as a student, or do they think I'm going to try to attack them?” Even when someone is going the same way as me, but they're in front of me, I'll slow down to allow them to go ahead so they know that I'm not following them, that I'm just going the same way that you are ... I've had this conversation before – literally there are so many things that we do to make people feel comfortable that we don't realise we're doing it anymore, but we are doing it because we maybe internalise that people think we are a threat.

Vince

In response to Vince’s experience of public space due to the negative intersectional meanings of his identity as a black inner-city young male, he responds by self-disciplining (Foucault 1977). Straight-jacketed by the possible valuations of others, he feels it necessary to convey himself “in a positive light” to strangers in public space, which it can be said is a tedious, uncomfortable and unfair exercise. The discomfort of self-surveillance and self-discipline are hidden and less-discussed aspects of the reality of intersectional subjectivity. It is worth noting that the psychological exertion of self-discipline was also an aspect of some mothers’ experiences, as discussed in chapter 6, in relation to judgements made about them as single-parent mothers. It is in these ways that intersectional representations (Crenshaw 1991:1245, 1282) and stereotypes and controlling images (Collins 1991; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Dow 2015), work as a form of disciplinary social control.

Research participants shared experiences of racial profiling (Glaser 2014; Dodd 2018) by security and police. A small number of sons mentioned being arbitrarily questioned by officers in the street. For example, Aaron said: "I was stopped and asked what I was doing around there. And I was

like, "Well I live on this road!" Michael told me he was first stopped at 13 and stopped regularly between the ages of 17 and 22. In contrast, most sons who were predominantly younger than age 25 had not experienced police harassment. This could reflect changing patterns of police practice over time. Black British men's experiences of police harassment are emerging (Brooks and Hattenstone 2003; Akala 2018) and racial disparities in police stop and search figures appeared to be stagnant. Black Londoners are 11 times more likely to be searched than white people using section 60, a power to search a person without suspicion (StopWatch 2019). Nonetheless, police harassment did not seem to be an everyday concern of the men I spoke to.

Perhaps as part of the legacy of racialised policing in London, there was still weariness among some members of the sample about racial profiling by police. For Barry, the presence of police meant it was important to practise self-discipline to avoid attracting negative attention from the police. From his perspective, the knowledge he had done nothing to justify any police attention was not enough:

When I see the police, I'm a very calm guy anyway, but I just know that I have to increase how calm I am.

Barry

Another way the police service was experienced differently was in seeking help as a victim of crime. JJ described duty officers as hostile and suspicious when she accompanied her son to a local police station to report the street robbery he had experienced. JJ said police searched their system checking for any record of past offences of her son. As a victim of a crime, JJ felt he was treated as a potential suspect instead. There is a historic pattern of police treating black victims as suspects (see Lawrence 2006; Brooks and Hattenstone 2003). This is yet another way that some intersectional subjects located at axes of age, race, gender and geography, such as young black male Londoners, may have an unequal experience of living in the city. A further and not dissimilar example of this was described by Natalie of neighbourhood police accusing her son, aged ten, of stealing his bicycle:

... it was very aggressive, "we think he's stolen that bike," he said, "I'm sorry officer, my mum bought this bike in Halfords, would you like me to get the receipt for you?' And the whole situation flipped.

Natalie

In Natalie's view, the police officers were being malicious and the situation was diffused due to the politeness of her son: "I've seen when the police agitate like that", Natalie recalled, "winding people up until they are provoked". She shared what she had taught her son from age nine, based

on her knowledge of local police practice: "when you deal with them, the best thing is to be really calm and smile because they don't know what to do with that and then they let you go quicker". This feigned politeness, in response to being accused of theft, could be seen as a form of Foucauldian docility (Foucault 1977) and emotional labour (Hochschild 2012[1983]; Wilkinson 2018) but it worked to protect Natalie's son from a possibly more unpleasant encounter.

In the critical analysis of her study of African-American women raising sons in a racialised climate, Dow suggests that when mothers encourage their sons to "engage in acts of deference" it advertently serves to reproduce a social structure that subordinates black people (2016:182). Dow convincingly asserts

[There is] a tension between individual strategies of survival and strategies that challenge and transform existing race, classed and gendered hierarchies.

(Dow 2016:182)

Sons' differential experiences and the resultant double-consciousness – distinctive yet less-known due to sons' neglected intersectional location at race, gender, age and geography – may have punctured the innocence of childhood and youth. Again, these experiences are rarely explored and addressed in dominant parenting discourse due to the underrepresentation of these issues, which demonstrates the need for an intersectional, constructive knowledge project on parenting and 'race'. Natalie described a frustration that despite her efforts as a parent, her son was still vulnerable to criminalisation: "It's almost like it doesn't matter how hard you plan when you parent, and what you've put into your children, it's the other bit of the society that you can't control - those are the things that need changing."

In conclusion

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 focused on mothers' and sons' perspectives, relationships, identities and emotions. This chapter broadened its scope to examine participants' accounts of life in England's capital at varying intersections of family structure, race, geography, gender, and age. This focus revealed differential and unequal experiences realities of schooling, childhood, neighbourhoods and urban public space, creating unique pressures and constraints for dyads. The types of experiences outlined in participants' narratives and analysed here, shaped by 'race' and its intersections, are less discussed at the societal level let alone problematised, as they generally do not affect the majority group.

Sons' differential experiences meant additional labour mothers, creating another dimension to the already challenging task of single-parenting. Due to the individualisation and gendering of carework, single-parent women, as the sole or main parent, were the default responder to their children's issues in schools, to neighbourhood pressures and to experiences of racism in public space, which sometimes involved having to carry out forms of advocacy on behalf of sons. As argued by Crenshaw (1989:150-152), dominant ways of thinking about inequality do not capture the claims and experiences of intersectional subjects.

Narratives which demonstrate single-parentism in society have not been prevalent here due to the themes focused on. Further research that specifically examines single-parent women's experiences of society, including housing, childcare, benefits, and employment could be illuminating in this regard.

There is a need for more critical and constructive knowledge on how the city is experienced by intersectional subjects, such as single black mother-son dyads. This chapter has focused on the additional challenges some mothers and sons have faced in London as these themes emerged strongly in the data and it was important to make these narrated realities visible. For too long the prevalence of single black mother families has been problematised for its perceived social ramifications, specifically an assumed causal association with urban social problems, but what has been less engaged with is the unequal ways in which mothers and their children experience the city they call home. In surviving London materially and psychologically, single mothers and men raised by them demonstrate their 'staying power'.

9. Conclusion

This study has focused on single black mother-son dyads in the British context. At the start of the thesis, I tried to demonstrate that intersectional social constructions of this dyad have consisted of negative stereotypes of blackness, single parenthood, womanhood and young masculinity. I argued that distorted assumptions about family structure and the dyad among black populations can be understood as a form of racist and single-parentist essentialism. The study went on to examine alternative and constructive understandings of the dyad in Chapter 2 and then in Chapter 4 to argue the need for a study on the single black mother-son dyad which takes a generative approach rather than, as Phoenix puts it, one which is “problem-centred” and “stress[es] negative findings” (1994:152). Intersectionality was chosen as an appropriate analytic framework to analyse the research data. Intersectionality is known for its effectiveness in “dismantl[ing] essentialism” and “craft[ing] nuanced theories” of “difference” and “oppression” (Nash 2008: 4). It is distinctive in its ability to illuminate and to problematise the complex experiences of subjects simultaneously positioned across categories of difference (Collins and Bilge 2020). The multifaceted realities of these subjects have been under-represented among the main resistant knowledge traditions of antiracism and feminism (Combahee River Collective 1977; Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Data analysis focused on mothers’ and sons’ definitions of their situations, relationships, family lives and social experiences. The research findings suggest the narratives detailed in Chapter 1 are inaccurate and outdated.

I want to acknowledge here that it has been difficult to completely depart from dominant and distorted narratives about the dyad and the single-mother family structure. Due to representational intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991:1245, 1282) cultural imagery composed of combinations of single-parentism, racism, sexism and classism remain omnipresent references, and it was important to critically engage with these. It is also due to political intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) that the perspectives, realities and claims of subjects multiply-positioned across race, family structure, class and gender, are overlooked by well-established social movements and are under-theorised within well-established resistant knowledge traditions. This means there largely remains an absence of positive and generative ideas and language with which to analyse this parent-child

relationship and family structure. Again, this shows the space for a new paradigm on family structure, race, and gender.

In this final chapter, I reflect on the research project overall. I outline its key findings and their relevance and suggest new directions for academic research in this area. In the first section of this chapter, I provide answers to my original research questions. In the second section, I highlight the study's contributions to sociological knowledge. The third section briefly discusses where this study can be placed in the landscape of existing literature, and the final section makes suggestions for further research.

9.1 Answers to research questions

To reiterate, the central questions of the research were: what can the accounts of single mothers and men raised by them, tell us about the experience of black single-parent family life? How and in what ways do mothers and sons respond to their situations, their circumstances and the social conditions? What are the intersectional roles of race, gender, class, geography and family structure in the narrated accounts? In their social contexts, to what extent can mothers and children exert control over their lives? I address each question in turn.

Dyads' accounts of their family lives suggest that the majority had 'ordinary' parent-child relationships and family lives, contrary to claims about the inadequacy of the family structure. There is an indication that even within less supportive dyads and home environments, sons' lives progressed in line with life trajectory norms when they feel confident in creating a stable life for themselves. For instance, the accounts of participant sons Vince and Santiago demonstrated their resourcefulness and tenacity despite weak and non-existent relationships with their parents. The collective research account suggests that mothers' and sons' distinctive experiences at intersections of family structure, gender and race are complicated, in that they are difficult in some ways, but also encompass positive dimensions. Those positive dimensions include mothers' resistance to marginalisation through individual, family and community empowerment and for sons, in the development of gendered consciousness in developing critiques of narrow definitions of black masculinity as well as forms of feminist consciousness. These are some of the ways that the study indicates not only that the dyad within black populations may not be the problem it has been argued to be, but also that experiences at axes of race, family structure, class and gender can be in some ways liberating, instructive and empowering.

The research accounts suggest mothers and sons are thoughtful and agentic in their responses to their circumstances. One example is how some sons experienced pain and anger around situations with their fathers, including confusion and a sense of loss. But these difficult internal experiences are processed in conventional ways, rather than through bad behaviour as claimed. Another is how many of the mothers mobilised knowledge and social consciousness to try to fully meet the needs of their children. In Chapter 5, it was shown how most mothers in the sample prepared their children for the racist world and that this was seen as a parental duty: “you have to be able to have these conversations with your children,” said participant mother Alice, “otherwise you’re sending your children out really ill-equipped for the land in which they live”. Some sons positively reflected on the benefit of such efforts. Samson recalled his mother’s attempts to facilitate love and value of blackness and self-belief in her children through things like literature and art in the home. For him, if it was not for this aspect of his mother’s carework, “I might not have been able to go out into the world and think much of myself”. The study suggests that mothers and sons generally do not surrender to difficulties, contradicting the notion of family structure and the dyad as “hopeless”.

The research data indicates that interconnected social divisions of family structure, race, class, gender and geography are producing distinctive and unequal experiences of the city for dyads. This includes experiences in schools and local neighbourhoods. Chapter 8 examined the geographic context in which participants’ single parenting and youth took place. Across the sample of sons and mothers, there was a common view that being racialised as black produced distinctive and complex vulnerabilities for young people within schools as well as in public spaces. A large portion of sons had been the victim of a robbery, which was normalised as a part of inner-city life. For Lenny, “it was bound to happen!” He explained why he saw this as an almost inevitable experience: “You can be someone that has no clue about gang crime...You don’t need to be involved...You just gotta be black...” Mothers’ and sons’ responses to difficult neighbourhood conditions included containment within the home – recall Barry’s comment, “if I didn’t have to be out, I wouldn’t be out” – and schedules of activities. “I invested so much of my time and money in my son because I couldn’t let him just play out”, participant mother Natalie said, “because it worried me too much”. She recalled a view shared among fellow black mothers locally: “we’ve got black boys, we can’t just leave them on the streets of Hackney to play”. There was a sense among participants that in public sons were, as black male youth, either hypervisible and vulnerable to negative attention or invisible and under-protected. Distorted intersectional social constructions

of dyads mean these distinctive experiences are either ignored or naturalised and depoliticised, which reproduces the subjugation of dyads and families. This demonstrates the need for more knowledge and fuller representation of the varied social realities of dyads and single black mother families.

The extent to which single black mothers and their children exert control over their lives is constrained by the structural inequalities of gender, race, class and family structure. They combine to create the distinctive conditions mothers and sons live against. For instance, the societal gendering of carework meant mothers' excessive responsibility for children, which in turn created multitudinous forms of constraint for them. An ethos mentioned by mothers of "just getting on with it", was rational in the absence of a movement that could validate, articulate, and take forward their concerns and claims. Additionally, due to negative stereotypes and the signification of their bodies, mothers and sons variously encountered forms of dismissal and suspicion, detailed in Chapter 8. One instance of this was Theresa being questioned in a secondary school parent interview if she was married, and as she was not, about who would be supporting her son with homework. Others are examples of sons unfairly being suspected by teachers, police and passers-by. Their individuality was obscured by the social meanings imposed upon them. Their social conformity did not protect them from discriminatory encounters because of their subjugated positioning within the human hierarchy.

These themes indicate a need for increased knowledge of experiences at the intersection of blackness, single-parent family structure and motherhood and youth. Negative meanings about single-parent family structure precluded mothers' and sons' identification with it and reclaiming of it, as demonstrated in Chapter 5. However, the findings of this study suggest there are potentially alternative, positive meanings. A reclamation of family structure raises the possibility of creating space for perspective building, claim-making and empowered new subjectivities.

9.2 Contributions to sociological knowledge

This empirical, qualitative research provides valuable insight into the experiences and social realities of black dyads in the British context. It indicates that the single mother-son dyad may not be as problematic as claimed. The findings of the study undermine the longstanding claim that the family structure is a negative life determinant. It signals that there may be some general positive elements of family structure: the space for mothers' autonomy, self-discovery and

empowerment, and, for sons, the development of critical consciousness on gender and self-definition.

The research raises questions about male role model discourse, the claim that sons require close relationships with adult male figures for gender socialisation and to become well-adjusted adults. Sons' accounts show there is no consensus among them on this perceived need, or about masculine identity as desirable. Masculinity was a concept that many of the participant sons were critical about, including Vince: "Masculinity is such a weird construct," he opined, "I would say it's quite a negative construct". Additionally, a large portion of sons cited their women relatives as positive and powerful figures in their lives, the epitome of this was Lenny asserting: "I can stand proud and say, "I'm a strong black man," thanks to my mum". This undermines the sexist and single-parentist arguments outlined in Chapter 1, which implied the single mothering of sons is inadequate, harmful and has social ramifications. In my study, there was ambivalence around and rejection of, the male role model narrative. Sons stressed the importance of character traits in any role model-type figure over gender-matching. These findings signal that the problematisation of single mother-son dyads as well as the focus on absent fathers rather than present mothers has been misguided and possibly even counterproductive.

Another key finding is the difficult emotional dimensions of this family structure for some mothers and sons. At the intersection of family structure, gender and race, mothers described the pressure they felt as racialised and hyper-visible mothers to fulfil the demands of their parental role to a high standard. Many mothers described a necessity for stoicism and performative strength in their position. Conversely, difficult experiences of fathers and the local neighbourhood could be disturbing for sons. Interior experiences are hidden from view and this is especially true for this multiply-subjugated group. Such emotional and psychic needs are generally underserved in society because they are overlooked or unknown.

Scholars and writers have long problematised the intersectional representation (Song and Edwards 1997; Phoenix 1996; Reynolds 1997, 2005; Akala 2018; Bola 2019a, 2019b) and the differential experiences of black mothers and young black people at varying intersections of race, class, gender, family structure, age, and geography (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 1985[2018]; Golden 1995; Reynolds 2005; Lawrence 2007; Chapman and Bhopal 2013; Dow 2015, 2016a; Elliot and Reid 2016; Ward 2017; Akala 2018; Elliot-Cooper 2019; McClain 2019). My research provides supporting evidence to longstanding claims that the inferiorisation of family difference

has worked to conceal the complex nature of experiences at the intersection of family structure and race. Experiences are sometimes shaped by forms of intersecting inequality and discrimination. Moreover, my research has identified and made explicit the significance of family structure as a category of social division and begun to demonstrate the way it intersects with other social divisions. It also identified single parentism as a form of oppression working interconnectedly with other forms of discrimination through intersectional social constructions, social attitudes and through social arrangements which naturalise and do not work to ameliorate the excessive caring responsibility of single mothers. The study demonstrates the need for resistant and constructive knowledge of the single-parent family structure generally, and of the intersection of blackness and single-parent family structure, as well as for recognition of single-parentism and its effects.

The intersectional positioning of dyads and single-mother families has meant their experiences and claims have slipped through the gaps of social movements and intellectual traditions. As mentioned, mothers and sons were more likely to be defensive of, ambivalent about, or to distance themselves from the single-parent family structure, rather than positively identify with it or seek to reclaim it. Distorted intersectional social constructions have worked to shape dominant understandings and permeated self- and family valuations. A thought tradition is important for reclaiming and reimagining family structure as well as untangling the effects of family structure inequality and race inequality. This might be an 'anti-single-parentism' which asserts the strengths of single motherhood and single-mother families and works to eradicate single-parentism, as well as the ways it interconnects with racism and sexism and other social forces.

As mentioned, it has been difficult to forge alternative narratives of the dyad and the family structure in this study as reductive approaches to the topic are hegemonic and seemingly impossible to ignore. This difficulty shows the need for further theorisation and empirical work.

9.3 Future research directions

This empirical qualitative study has raised questions about dominant understandings of the single mother-son dyad, family structure, young black masculinity and black women's lives as single mothers. However, my research is also small-scale and non-representative. This means generalisations and robust claims cannot be made from it. While it does signal that longstanding assumptions about the dyad are erroneous, further work is needed to fully explore this. A mixed-

methods study with a diverse sample of mothers and children would be instructive. This would ideally include both sons and daughters to further explore gender dynamics and the varying perspectives of family members, as well as a sample representative of the class and geographic diversity of single black mother families in England. This would build a clearer, more detailed picture of the intersection of blackness, single-parent family structure, motherhood and youth in the British context. A quantitative survey element in a mixed-methods study would enable clearer measurement of discrimination and inequalities experienced at varying intersections of family structure, race, class and geography. The data on dyads' experiences of London detailed in Chapter 8 highlighted issues within the context of the capital, and it would worthwhile comparing experiences in different UK cities and across urban, suburban and rural geographies. As previously mentioned, recent research had demonstrated that general single-parentism is endemic in British society. As previously mentioned, mixed-methods research by Talbot (2021) found that 80% of single parents in the UK had experienced some form of discrimination due to single-parentism, including in the areas of employment, benefits and housing. It is vital that single black mothers and their children's differential experiences in Britain, due to the intersection of racism and single-parentism, are quantified and detailed, to provide persuasive evidence for policymakers of how family structure and its intersections are shaping experience and the need for social reforms. Qualitative research on the internal experience of family structure, of its emotional and psychic dimensions, is also vital for building more accurate knowledge and informing policy, practice and positive social action for improved support.

This study has highlighted the diversity and complex nature of mothers' and sons' experiences. It has shown how they respond to difficulties with critical consciousness, agency and empowerment. While experiences of family life and dyadic relationships were 'ordinary', their societal experiences were multi-textured. This presents new questions. How can the strengths of the dyad and the family structure be highlighted without obscuring their struggles? How can these struggles be problematised without reinforcing inferiorising discourses? And more broadly, what would a resistant and generative knowledge tradition of the intersection of single-mother family structure and blackness look like and articulate?

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Appendix A: information sheet

The lone mothers and sons research project

Reflections on experiences in Black single parent families

You are being invited to contribute to the above named research project by taking part in an interview. This study is the PhD research project of Miranda Armstrong, a doctoral student in the Sociology Department of Goldsmiths College, University of London. Here is some information to help you decide whether or not to take part, including why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and ask Miranda (you will find her contact details overleaf) if you have any questions. Thank you very much for your interest.

What is the purpose of the project?

The research has three main aims:

1. To develop a fuller understanding of the experiences of single mothers of sons and of sons raised solely by their mothers.
2. To produce new knowledge, which highlights the factors that enable family members to thrive.
3. To try to counter the negative public understandings of single mother families, particularly those of African and Caribbean heritage, and especially around single mothers raising male children.

Why have I been chosen?

The project is asking many different mothers and adult sons to contribute to the research. It is up to you whether or not you choose to take part – participation is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part and then change your mind, you are still free to withdraw at any time and do not have to give a reason for your decision.

What will taking part involve?

I will interview you either at your home or at Goldsmiths College. The interview will be fairly similar to a conversation. With mother participants I am interested in hearing about their experiences of being a lone parent to their son(s). Discussions with adult sons will explore their journey to manhood under the care of their single mother. One to one interviews are about me listening to your own story so the time of each interview will vary but should take around 60-90 minutes.

What topics will the interview cover?

Topics that are likely to be covered include the mother/son relationship, the father/son relationship if relevant, adolescence, family life, masculinity and identity, education and work, support networks and living in the city.

What are the possible benefits of contributing to the project?

What you share will help improve knowledge and understanding about life in single parent families and how individuals navigate certain circumstances. Unfortunately there are no immediate benefits for people participating, though some people find the opportunity to share their stories and to be listened to is positive.

Who will see the information I share?

All data is confidential and will be anonymised. My PhD supervisors and examiners will see some of it as part of the completed thesis. Some data will be used as part of sharing research findings in academic articles and at conferences as well as part of a published book. You will not be able to be identified in the thesis or any publications unless you express a wish to be named.

How can I find out about research results?

I will present the research findings in a group meeting to participants who are interested. This is to try to ensure participants' experiences are fairly and accurately interpreted. Participants will receive an electronic copy of the thesis on request.

For further information please contact: Miranda Armstrong, student researcher
m.armstrong@gold.ac.uk
07949 120 646

Appendix B: consent form

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS The lone mothers and sons research project

Reflections on experiences in Black single parent families

The Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths College, University of London attach high priority to the ethical conduct of research. **Alongside this form, you should read the Information Sheet.** If you have any questions regarding the research or use of the data collected through the study, please do not hesitate to ask the researcher. We therefore ask you to consider the following points before agreeing to take part in this research:

- The interview will be audio recorded.
- Some data will be used as part of sharing research findings in book form, in academic articles and as part of conference presentations.
- All data will be treated as personal under the 1998 Data Protection Act, and will be stored securely.
- All participants receive anonymity unless a wish to be identified is specified. Please tick the box below if you do.

I wish to be fully identified

- If you decide at any time during the research that you no longer wish to participate in this project, you can withdraw immediately without giving any reason.
- You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep and refer to at any time.
- By signing this form you assign copyright of your contribution to the researcher.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of the research, please contact the ethics officer of the Goldsmiths Sociology department, Professor Marsha Rosengarten, m.rosengarten@gold.ac.uk

I confirm that I have freely agreed to participate in the 'Mothers and sons' research project. I have been briefed on what this involves and I agree to the use of my data as described above. I understand that the material is protected by a code of professional ethics.

Participant Signature:

Name:

Date:

Contact details (for feedback purposes):

Researcher Signature:

Name:

For further information contact: Miranda Armstrong, m.armstrong@gold.ac.uk

Appendix C: participant information sheets

Participant Information - Mothers

Here are a few initial questions to help me learn a little more about you and your son

Your age:

London borough you raised your son in:

Your occupation:.....

Your ethnic heritage:.....

Your age at the time of the birth of your son/s:

What is the highest educational qualification you had received at the time of your son's birth? And since, if different?

.....

What is the highest educational qualification your son/s have received so far?

.....

Current occupation of your son/s:.....

Please choose a pseudonym to be used in the thesis if you would like one:

.....

Thank you very much for answering these questions.

Participant Information - sons

Here are a few questions to help me learn a little more about you

Your age:

London borough you grew up in:

Your occupation:

Your ethnic heritage:

What is the highest educational qualification you have received? .

.....

Your mother's age at the time of your birth:

What was the highest educational qualification your mother had received when raising you and has received now (if different):.....

Mother's occupation during your upbringing and now (if different):.....

.....

Please choose a pseudonym to be used in the thesis if you would like one:

.....

Thank you very much for answering these questions.