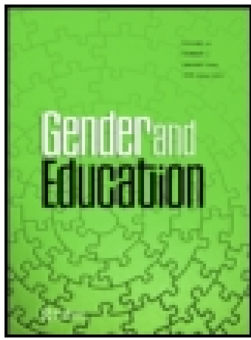

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Distinctiveness, deference and dominance in Black Caribbean fathers' engagement with public schools in London and New York City

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ABSTRACT
In the US and UK, Black fatherhood has long been steeped in narratives of pathology. Despite the promotion of nuanced understandings of Black fatherhood in recent scholarship, research on Black fathers' positive engagement with urban schools remains remarkably limited. This article adds to the literature by highlighting the strategies Black Caribbean fathers deploy to challenge assumptions about their identities and involvement. Based on 20 in-depth interviews with 10 Caribbean immigrant fathers in London and New York City, the analysis rendered utilises Critical Race Theory to highlight how some Black men attempt to counter racial subordination through masculine domination, particularly when engaging with white female teachers. The empirical analysis reveals that groups of Caribbean immigrant fathers draw on three common strategies to offset negative stereotypes about their engagement and assert their masculinities – namely, distinctiveness, deference and dominance.

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Black immigrant fathers; parental involvement; urban school engagement; microaggressions; Critical Race Theory

Introduction

Across the US and UK, Black fathers are often framed in deficit terms in the public imagination (Allen 2013; Bradshaw et al. 1999; Burghes, Clarke, and Cronin 1997). From the early twentieth century to the present, Black fathers have been regularly stereotyped as irresponsible, deviant, weak-willed and absent parental figures (Reynolds 2009). However, the intricacies of Black fathers' identities extend far beyond the scope of such limited pathological perspectives. In an attempt to advance richer, more complex representations of Black masculinities, a new wave of scholarship in the US and UK promotes positive, asset-based perspectives on Black fatherhood and deconstructs the historical, economic, political and cultural factors that contribute to the stereotypical construction of Black males generally, and Black fathers specifically, in schools and society (Brown 2011; Howard 2013; Reynolds 2003; Wright et al. 1998). And yet, even with the growing body of research challenging reductionist perspectives on Black masculinities across the life course, there remains a dearth of scholarship on Black fathers' identities and involvement in public schools.[1]

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Additionally, several key questions remain under-examined. For instance, how do Black Caribbean fathers negotiate relationships with predominantly white school authorities on behalf of their children and families? How do Black Caribbean fathers confront and counter the negative assumptions of school officials about their engagement in education? To what extent do the presumed cultural and ideological biases of teachers hinder or undermine Black fathers' motivations for continued engagement with schools? This paper addresses these questions and investigates the strategies of a group of Black Caribbean fathers in London and New York City (NYC) engaging school authorities for the academic advancement of their children.

The involvement of Black Caribbean fathers has received renewed attention recently. In February, 2016, for example, an article in *The Guardian* titled 'Black Men "Best in Britain" at Sharing Household Chores,' inspired considerable intrigue about the unequal distribution of labour in British households. Reporting on a study of attitudinal and behavioural differences among 30,000 couples across the UK, Doward (2016) highlights that while women from all racial and ethnic backgrounds spend more time on household chores than men, Black Caribbean men, on average, spent 7 hours per week on household duties, while their female partners devoted 13.5 hours per week to such work. In explaining why Black Caribbean men shared approximately 40% of the workload in a series of complex family formations, Kan and Laurie (2016) argue that: '[w]ork done in the US suggested that the historical roots of a lot of black Caribbeans mean they have a more egalitarian family structure, and we seem to see that here … ' (Doward 2016, 48). Kan and Laurie (2016) also maintain that Black Caribbean men's striking involvement in household chores is due, at least in part, to black Caribbean women's long-standing participation in the labour market and the limited opportunity structures that constrain Black men's progress in it. As such, one could argue that Black Caribbean men's marked engagement in housework is perhaps more an outcome of structural constraints than substantive convictions on gender equity – arguably more about racialised limitations in the labour force than full liberation in gender expectations in the home.

Black Caribbean men's involvement is not only noteworthy in households; it is also of import in schools (Allen 2013). As such, the rest of this article turns its attention to the engagement strategies of Black Caribbean immigrant fathers in urban public schools in London and NYC, highlighting the gendered approaches they summon to counter racism. I first analyse central and cognate scholarship on Black masculinities, noting the paucity of works on Black immigrant fathers and the striking absence of cross-national perspectives on Black fathers' engagement with public schools. Next, I present Critical Race Theory (CRT) as an apposite theoretical frame for discussing Black immigrant fathers' interactions with white female staff in urban schools. Following the outline of the research design, the empirical analysis reveals that immigrant and second-generation Black Caribbean fathers in the study draw on three common strategies to offset negative stereotypes about their identities and involvement in urban schools. The first strategy is distinctiveness, expressing themselves as responsible fathers and distancing themselves from popular constructs of irresponsible Black fatherhood. The second strategy is deference, as noted in their routine attempts to call on their own childhood engagement with teachers in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in the Caribbean as frames of reference for negotiating 'respectful' relationships with teachers in London and NYC (Chevannes 2002; Cobbett and Younger 2012). The third is dominance, marked by efforts to summon gender

microaggressions as expressions of masculine domination to counter racial microaggressions (Dillabough 2004). This article closes with a set of recommendations for urban schools in London and NYC on how to increase Black fathers' participation.

Framing Black fatherhood in cross-national perspectives

To date, cross-national analyses of Black fathers in the US and UK are extremely limited in sociological and educational research. Cross-national perspectives can provide insights into the points of convergence and divergence in the experiences of Black fathers in key institutions such as schools and families. Clarke, Cooksey, and Verropoulou (1998) provide the first and only such comparison of fathers in the US and UK. They maintain that although survey data on fatherhood were collected in the US since the 1970s, '[t]he first national sample survey to ask British men of all ages about children they had ever fathered was [only] conducted in 1992' (Clarke, Cooksey, and Verropoulou 1998, 218). As such socio-demographic comparisons on fatherhood across the US and UK were nearly impossible. In their attempt to explain absent fatherhood, Clarke, Cooksey, and Verropoulou's (1998) analysis of the British Household Panel Survey and the US National Survey of Families and Households reveals that the most significant predictor of fathers' absence 'is the parents' relationship to each other at the time of the child's birth' (217). This piece represents an important departure from the norm of documenting changes in family life almost exclusively through the perspectives of mothers – traditional views that inadvertently reinforce parenting and caring as primarily women's work and render fathers invisible in the discourse on parental participation (Reynolds, Howard, and Jones 2015).

Despite its innovations, Clarke, Cooksey, and Verropoulou's (1998) work has some salient shortcomings. While Clarke, Cooksey, and Verropoulou's (1998) research challenges elements of nuclear normativity by noting the diversity of family formations at the turn of the twenty-first century, and centring fathers' absence as consequential for mothers' constrained material resources, their work only peripherally examines Black fathers. When Black fathers are discussed, Clarke, Cooksey, and Verropoulou (1998) frame them in compromising terms as frequently absent figures more likely to be teen fathers than white men in the two country contexts. Furthermore, the piece builds on the all-too-common 'absent/present' binary in relation to fatherhood and shores up a set of assumptions of fathers' involvement as best facilitated by residence in households rather than a wide-range of practices for being an engaged presence in the lives of children (Reynolds 2009). Finally, while in-depth consideration of fathers' contributions to the educational institutions that serve their children may have been beyond the scope of Clarke, Cooksey, and Verropoulou's (1998) piece, no mention was made of the social and educational institutions that fathers may be engaged in on behalf of their children. Given these shortcomings, there is an urgent need for cross-national qualitative research that examines Black fathers' engagement beyond the home and their experiences negotiating relationships with public schools.

Although remarkably little cross-national research has been conducted that accounts for Black fathers' substantive and positive involvement in the US and UK, there are bodies of scholarship in both national contexts on Black fatherhood worth exploring.

In what follows, I explore the literature on Black fathers in the US and examine research on Black fathers in the UK.

Black fatherhood in the US

In the US, Black males continue to be associated with troubling, reductionist classifications such as 'at-risk', 'underachieving', 'absentee', among others (Bristol 2015). And despite the election of the US' first African-American president – one who grew up with an 'absentee' Black African father – such skewed, pathologising categorisations of Black males have not lost their prominence and power (Allen 2013). Whether stated in the media or inferred in academic scholarship, these labels highlight Black males as deviant, dangerous and deficient. Furthermore, these pejorative views foreclose asset-based perspectives that offer 'holistic, positive and affirming accounts of Black males … ' (Howard 2013, 12). Reviewing scholarship on Black males in the US from 1930 to 2010, Brown (2011) finds that the literature from the 1930s to 1950s framed African-American men as: (1) 'absent, footloose and sexually irresponsible' due to perceptions of their migration patterns; (2) 'emasculated, feminine and impotent' in works published in the 1960s based on the strength of mother-centred parenting and the matriarchal structures of African-American families; (3) 'soulful and adaptive' in research from the 1970s and 1980s, marking the creativity and resilience of African-American males in the presence of white racism and (4) 'endangered and in crisis' in the academic discourse from the 1990s to the present, based on the social and educational outcomes of African-American males (2055). At every phase of the scholarly discourse on African-American males, Black fathers have been considered both a cause of, and a solution to, the challenges of Black males in society (Allen 2013).

Sociological and educational research has done a disservice to fathers generally – and Black fathers specifically – by remaining far more attentive to their 'absence rather than their presence' (Cazenave 1979, 583), far more concerned about their problems than their potential (Jones and Mosher 2013; Moynihan 1965). In the absence of balanced perspectives, corrosive myths about Black fathers continue to proliferate in the public imagination. Recent scholarship advancing asset-based perspectives suggests that the involvement of resident or non-resident Black fathers tend to have positive cognitive, behavioural, academic, psychological and social impact on their children (Allen 2013; Williams 2007). Furthermore, new reports confirm that 2.5 million Black fathers live with their children, while 1.7 are non-resident fathers (Levs 2015) – findings that challenge the myth of Black fathers as distant and disengaged. A 2013 report on fathers' involvement with their children released by the US Department of Health and Human Services suggests that Black fathers, resident and non-resident, are often more engaged in the daily care and development of their children under the age of 5 than white men. Drawing on a nationally representative sample of 10, 403 men collected between 2006 and 2010, Jones and Mosher (2013) find that 'Black fathers (70%) were most likely to have bathed, dressed, diapered, or helped their children use the toilet every day compared with white (60%) and Hispanic fathers (45%)' (6). See Tables 1 and 2 for additional details.

The merits of recent works notwithstanding, there remain gaps in the small, but growing, body of scholarship on Black fatherhood. Firstly, there is no published sociological or educational research on Black immigrant fathers living in the US. Given on-going

Table 1. Fathers living with children.

	Hispanic	White	Black
Fed or ate meals with their children daily	63.9	73.9	78.2
Bathed, diapered or dressed children daily	45.0	60.0	70.4
Played with children daily	74.1	82.7	82.2
Read to their children daily	21.9	30.2	34.9

immigration from the Caribbean, Europe and sub-Saharan Africa (Foner 2009; Hochschild and Mollenkopf 2009), there is a need to understand how Black immigrant fathers negotiate relationships in educational systems that are often altogether new to them. This can have significant educational policy implications for how we engage immigrant fathers in neoliberal democracies (Gillborn 2005). Secondly, the research on Black fathers in the US clearly identifies African-Americans, but does not account for ethnic distinctions among Blacks. To the extent that Black Caribbean and Black African immigrants are part of quantitative and qualitative studies on Black fatherhood they are misrecognised as African-Americans. Research exploring the experiences and engagement of immigrant and second-generation Black Caribbean (or Black Africans) stand to add nuance to a bourgeoning body of work on Black fatherhood.

Black fatherhood in the UK

Unlike the US, the UK has a rather long tradition of focusing explicitly on the experiences and outcomes of Black Caribbean males in academic scholarship. Yet, despite the acknowledgement of Black males' ethnicities in UK research, Black Caribbean males continue to be racialised in ways that are arguably similar to African-Americans in the US. Byfield (2008), for instance, argues that 'Black boys in the United Kingdom and the USA have almost become synonymous with the concept of "underachievement"' (189). With little variation by ethnicity, social class, generational background or national identity, Black males in the UK are often characterised as 'at-risk', 'failing', 'underachievers' and 'anti-intellectual' (Byfield 2008; Gillborn 2005). This 'web of stereotypes' reproduces one-sided narratives about Black males in British society and limits the chances and choices of Black males. These 'risk-inducing' labels are of considerable consequence because they include little, if any, substantive analysis of the historical and structural conditions that continue to constrain the daily opportunities and life options of Black males (Reynolds 2009; Wright et al. 1998). Central to the production of flawed representations of Black males in British society is the common assumption that the outcome of Black males is the result of poor and/or single, female-led parenting, often implicating Black fathers as absent, disengaged or irresponsible (Reynolds 2009).

Table 2. Fathers not living with children.

	Hispanic	White	Black
Fed or ate meals with their children daily	8.6	[a]	12.6
Bathed, diapered or dressed children daily	7.3	6.6	12.7
Played with children daily	10.0	6.6	16.5
Read to their children daily	[a]	3.2	7.8

[a]Denotes figures not meeting reliability standards.
Source: National Center for Health Statistics.

The complexities of Black male marginality cannot be reduced to non-traditional family formations, racialised masculine deviance or 'culturally embedded behaviour linked to African cultural heritage and slavery in the Caribbean and the United States' (Reynolds 2009, 16). Black male marginality is the outcome of deep-seated structural and socio-political conditions – past and present (Warrington and Younger 2000). Recent scholarship indicates that the outcome and engagement of Black males in social institutions such as schools and families are informed by a history of political disadvantage, economic marginalisation (Catney and Sabater 2015), mass incarceration (Gillborn 2005), segregated 'subnormal' schooling (Coard 1971), increasing rates of school exclusion (Wright et al. 1998), disproportionate classification as having emotional and behavioural difficulties (Crozier 2001) and other expressions of institutional racism. The pathologisation of Black fatherhood in the UK is therefore best understood in this context. The small body of research on Black fatherhood in the UK charts important ground by noting the impact of Black fathers' involvement on the health, development and well-being of their children (Williams 2007), the influence of widespread low cultural expectations of Black fathers (Gillborn 2005); the limits of programmes and policies that address Black male disadvantage through surrogate fatherhood or mentorship schemes (Reynolds 2009); the importance of changing family arrangements and the sustained engagement of Black fathers (Burghes, Clarke, and Cronin 1997). Given the dearth of quantitative works on Black fathers' engagement, Kan and Laurie's (2016) report provides useful results for refuting the assumption of Black Caribbean men's disengagement. Figure 1 offers comparative perspectives on the weekly participation of men in household chores and shows Black Caribbean men as the most engaged in domestic duties.

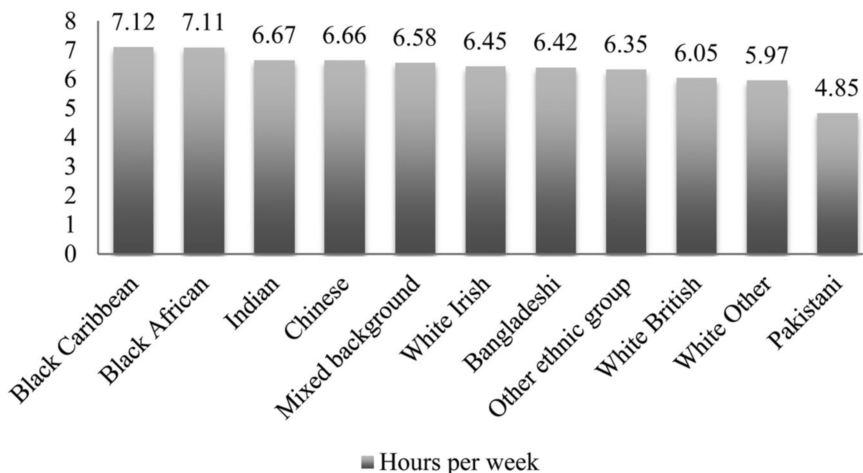

Figure 1. Mean hours of housework per week by gender and ethnicity. *N* men = 11,866/women = 13,025. Married and co-habitating respondents, 16–64 years of age. Data are weighted.
Source: Institute for Social and Economic Research, Kan and Laurie (2016).

Although recent scholarship in the UK provides generative interventions, gaps in the literature on Black fatherhood persist. Firstly, works on Black Caribbean fatherhood seldom account for generational differences among them. Such research hardly

acknowledges the experiential differences between immigrant and second-generation Black Caribbeans, but instead represents them as a homogenous group (Reynolds 2009). Secondly, there remains an important need to recognise in more substantive ways the status of Black fathers – whether as residential, non-residential, married, single, divorced, cohabitated or separated. Such identifications may contest the reification of nuclear normativity and highlight that non-residential arrangements are not synonymous with absenteeism, nor are traditional residential arrangements indicative of substantive parental engagement. Lastly, there is a shortage of published research on Black fathers' engagement beyond family life. Black fathers' involvement in public schools has long gone unrecognised and undervalued in educational research, in ways that arguably limit educational policy and institutional outreach.

The study

The data showcased in this article are drawn from a larger comparative ethnography exploring the contrasting educational experiences of working-class and middle-class second-generation Black Caribbean youth in one large public school in London and NYC. This cross-national project investigates the range of national, political, historical and cultural factors that inform the comparatively high achievement of Black Caribbeans in the US and the rather low achievement of Black Caribbeans in the UK. This study explores the influence of various social agents (peers, parents and teachers) on the educational expectations and outcomes of second-generation Black Caribbean youth. The analysis rendered in this article focuses exclusively on Black Caribbean immigrant fathers and the microaggressions they experience and employ in urban schools (Sigelman and Tuch 1997).

The participants discussed here (5 in London and 5 in NYC) were recruited in two phases. During the first phase, I conducted 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in one large school in London and NYC – spending seven months in each between 2012 and 2013. The schools (Newton in London and Bridgewood in NYC) host the largest numbers of first-, second- and third-generation Black Caribbeans in their respective boroughs, and afforded access to a significant number of immigrant fathers. In the first phase, five fathers whose daughter and/or son participated in the study agreed to be interviewed in their homes (three in NYC and two in London). The second phase of the project between 2013 and 2015 included a second round of interviews for the first cohort of fathers and the recruitment of an additional group of fathers for the project. Support for the recruitment of a second cohort of fathers came from the Black Caribbean young people I built and maintained relationships with before, during and after the research study. Invitation letters were hand-delivered by the young people in the study to their fathers, encouraging them to participate in an interview about their experiences in public schools and their advocacy for their children who attend them. A snowball approach yielded five additional fathers – (two in NYC and three in London). Between 2013 and 2015, the second group of fathers was interviewed twice. These interviews ranged from 60 to 95 minutes. Overall, this resulted in 20 in-depth interviews as part of an on-going multi-site ethnography. In this article, I focus on these fathers' voices, visions and advocacy on behalf of their children as a set of counter-narratives to deconstruct assumptions of Black Caribbean fathers' disengagement.

The fathers in the study participated in interviews, detailing their perceptions of schools, expectations for their children and engagement with school authorities. Generally, interviews were conducted in English, but occasionally exchanges between researcher and respondents were conducted in Caribbean Vernacular English or Caribbean creole. For the purposes of brevity, I translated all extracts in this article into Standard English. Pseudonyms are used for participants and schools throughout this paper for the sake of anonymity. For more information on the participants discussed in this article, see Tables 3 and 4. Results showcased in this article are based on the fathers' perceptions of and experiences with school officials (primarily teachers, head teachers/principals and deputy head teachers/assistant principals).

The fathers varied in social class, age, citizenship, duration in the host society and domestic arrangements. I consider fathers middle class if they self-identified as such ($N = 2$) or specified through degree attainment or managerial positions (e.g. NS-SEC 1 and 1), a middle-class standing ($N = 2$). The remaining participants were all classified as working class ($N = 6$). In this sample, 'middle class' is defined based on educational attainment irrespective of income, given the relationship among education, cultural capital and social mobility as explained by Bourdieu (1993). These fathers, ages 37–49, hail from Jamaica, Guyana, Martinique, Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada and Antigua. They came to the US and UK as economic migrants and through family reunification programmes. One participant is a university-educated undocumented immigrant, six are permanent residents and three are British or American citizens. Eight participants are immigrants and two are second-generation Black Caribbeans.

Designing and conducting this study as a Black Caribbean immigrant father of working-class background who studied and worked in the US and UK afforded me insights that I suspect would not be easily shared with a cultural outsider. Due to my status as a cultural insider, participants often spoke in Caribbean Vernacular English, frequently referencing Caribbean politics, history and current affairs. Participants also occasionally assumed an awareness of the dynamics they discussed. To ensure depth of understanding and to limit biased exegeses, I consistently encouraged participants to thoroughly explain their views and references. Perspectives still unclear at the end of the first interview were explored carefully at the start of the second.

Table 3. Descriptive details on US participants.

Name	Country of birth	Partner's country of birth	Social class	Occupation	Education	# of years in US	Marital status	Living arrangement
Winston	USA[b]	Jamaica	Working class	Carpenter	Secondary school	22	Cohabitating	Non-residential
Tony	Jamaica	Cayman	Middle class	Business owner	Associate's degree	11	Married	Residential
Clive	Jamaica	Jamaica	Working class	Carpenter	Secondary school	17	Married	Residential
Gary[a]	Antigua	USA	Middle class	Teacher	Master's degree	25	Divorced	Non-residential
Peter[a]	Jamaica	Guyana	Working class	Technician	Primary school	23	Single	Non-residential

[a]Participants recruited and interviewed in the second phase of the research study.
[b]While Winston was born in the US, he spent 3–4 years in Jamaica at a time throughout his childhood, followed by 2 years in the US. He settled in the US in his late teens.

Table 4. Descriptive details on UK participants.

Name	Country of birth	Partner's country of birth	Social class	Occupation	Education	# of years in US	Marital status	Living arrangement
Paul	Martinique	UK	Working class	Carpenter	Master's degree	21	Married	Residential
Harvey	Guyana	UK	Middle class	Business owner	Bachelor's degree	35	Cohabitating	Residential
Dennis[a]	Jamaica	UK	Working class	Carpenter	Secondary school	20	Separated	Non-residential
Troy[a]	UK	Jamaica	Middle class	Teacher	Secondary school	39	Married	Residential
Jermaine[a]	Grenada	UK	Working class	Technician	Primary school	24	Single	Non-residential

[a]Denotes participants recruited and interviewed in the second phase of the research study.

All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed and analysed using the qualitative software programme, NVivo. Analysis employed a modified grounded theory approach in two related phases (Strauss and Corbin 1998): (1) open coding to identify broad categories such as 'engagement with school authorities', 'advocacy for their children', among others; and (2) focused coding with categories such as 'interactions with white female teachers', with associated sub-codes like 'confronting racist assumptions about Black fatherhood' to add richness and depth to the analysis. With open and focused coding as central features of the analysis, layered perspectives on working-class and middle-class Black Caribbean fathers' involvement with public schools in London and NYC emerged, revealing the importance of strategic, subversive patterns of engagement. In the section that follows, I outline the core analytic features of CRT and the conceptual purchase of microaggressions.

Theoretical framework

CRT is an influential emancipationist programme that centres racism as a permanent and pervasive feature of society (Treviño, Harris, and Wallace 2008). Developed in the 1970s as a response to Critical Legal Studies' reductive analyses of racial inequality, scholars of colour formulated CRT as a countercultural paradigm to deconstruct racism as a 'fact of daily life' (Taylor 1998, 122), embedded deeply in the larger social and political structure (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000). What began as a cutting-edge exegesis of law and public policies has now become an increasingly popular analytical frame in the fields of education, sociology, political science and gender studies, among others (Cole 2009; Crenshaw 1993; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). Despite, or perhaps due to, its increasing popularity, CRT is often critiqued as a US import, a race-centred scheme insufficiently attentive to class disadvantage, and a history-heavy assessment that depreciates twenty-first century progress. I hold that CRT's analytical genealogy is rooted in Black intellectual tradition of the US and UK – and when applied rigorously, accounts for the relationship between race and class, in the past and the present.

Although CRT remains an evolving paradigm sensitive to twenty-first century changes in legal doctrines, systems and policies, there are some central principles that inform CRT analytics and activism. These include, but are not limited to: (1) *the centrality of racism*, which recognises racial inequality and racial animus as nuanced cultural and political norms in society (Soloranzo 1998); (2) *White Supremacy*, understood as a system of thought and practice that normalises white privilege, control of power and ownership of material and intellectual resources (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995); (3) *Voices of People of Colour*, centring the experiential knowledge of racially minoritised groups as credible counter-narratives rooted in the historical, social and political realities of women and men of colour that are useful for locating the limits of policy prescriptive often shaped by the white middle classes (Gillborn 2005); (4) *Interest convergence*, which holds that racial progress often occurs when aligned to the self-interests of white people (Bell 1992) and (5) *intersectionality*, coined to identify the consistently complex relationship among 'race', class, gender, sexuality and other social categories that have long been explored as separate features of social life in traditional anti-racist and feminist scholarship (Crenshaw 1993). As the cornerstone of Critical Race Feminism (Evans-Winter and Esposito 2010), intersectionality calls attention to the 'gendered, classed, sexual,

immigrant and language experiences and histories [that are often] silenced' (Yosso 2005, 72).

Unfortunately, intersectionality is rarely applied to discussions of microaggressions, another core concept of CRT of increasing utility. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) define racial microaggressions as 'subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal and/or visual) directed toward People of Colour, often automatically or unconsciously' (60). But centring 'race' in CRT does not mean undermining the influence of gender, class and sexuality. A robust reading of CRT requires acknowledging microaggressions as not solely racial transgressions, but offences based on gender, sexual orientation, social class and the like (Sue et al. 2007). To this end, I propose a classification that captures the complex sequence of racial and gender microaggressions.

Racial microaggressions do not operate in unique social fields separate from gender microaggressions. In fact, racial, class and gender microaggressions often overlap, intersect and compete in the daily events of social life (Crenshaw 1993). This can result in *divergent microaggressions* and *convergent microaggressions*. I define divergent microaggressions as the subtle or strategic deployment of one form of oppression (e.g. sexism) by a minoritised group (e.g. Black men) to counter another form of oppression (e.g. racism) from white women. By contrast, convergent microaggressions highlight the use of two or more forms of oppression (e.g. racism and classism) by one group (e.g. white women) to subordinate a multiply minoritised group (poor Black women or working-class Black immigrant men). While divergent microaggressions are bi-directional, convergent microaggressions are exclusively unidirectional. This typology is an exercise in intersectionality that acknowledges the direction and design of domination. In keeping with CRT, such classifications can draw attention to the complex configurations of microaggressions in social fields (Wallace 2016). The voice-centred analysis in subsequent sections will illustrate how divergent microaggressions and convergent microaggressions function in Black fathers' engagement with urban public schools.

The findings

The findings of this project illustrate that Black Caribbean fathers in this study draw on three common strategies to counter the range of stereotypes and microaggressions they confront during their interactions with school officials – namely, distinctiveness, deference and dominance. These strategies are not sequential, but circumstantial. Each of these approaches constitutes a strategy of individual resistance that proves useful to mitigating everyday microaggressions, but limited in its ability to transform the cultural structures of urban public schools.

Distinctiveness: the polemics of being 'Different'

The Black Caribbean fathers in this study highlighted their engagement efforts as substantive – including accompanying their children to school, picking them up from school, attending parent–teacher conferences regularly, and enlisting their children in a host of supplementary school programmes, after-school, and weekend co-curricular endeavours. Through a range of formal and informal interactions with school officials in and outside of school, the fathers in this study grew sensitive to the rewards and risks of their

engagement with public schools. They frequently drew on a sense of distinctiveness as a counter-performance to the negative, normative framework that assumed their absence or disengagement. For example, Paul, a 42-year-old manager of a hospital in East London, suggested that given teachers' popular perceptions of Black fathers, it proved profitable to quietly challenge teachers' racial and gender biases. He explains:

> As a Black father, you can't afford to have these teachers, especially the white British lot, think that you are what they think you are. You have to let them know that you're not the stereotype they expect you to be … I make sure I tell them that I am a different kind of Black father. I attend all the parent meetings I can, I try to be suited and booted when I meet with them, and I remind them that I am active in [my child's] life … I tell them, I'm not like the rest …

Paul is not at all alone in his strategic declarations of distinctiveness. Dennis, 45-year-old South-London-based construction worker, affirms the view that like Paul, he is not a stereotype 'like the rest'. He argues:

> … you can't give teachers reasons to think that you are just another lazy Black father … The other day one of the white teachers was surprised that I wrote her a letter about my son's grades. When she called me she said 'Oh, Mr Smith, I was so pleased to hear from you. I hadn't realized that you were so committed.' I was like, 'what do you mean?' and then she said something like 'You are clearly a different kind of dad.' I was glad she realized. I might not be posh, but I am not the regular kind of Black father and what what … Why would she be surprised that I am 'so committed'? … I think she doesn't expect much from Black fathers, but I am glad she knows I'm a different kettle of fish. She better remembers that when she is talking to my son!

Counter-narratives by UK-based fathers such as Paul and Dennis highlight the rather charged interactions with teachers that can occur in public schools. Like other Black fathers in the study, Paul and Dennis confront a series of low expectations and racialised gender stereotypes held by the teachers that they actively unseat through expressions of their distinctiveness. The results from the US-based respondents underscore the fathers' understanding of their distinctiveness as both a declaration *and* a performance (Butler 1999). Tony, owner and manager of a chain of small Caribbean restaurants, explains how his actions reinforce his speech to earn teachers' respect.

> Look man, you can't just tell these teacher that you are different … They know that a lot of the parents who just come care about their children's education. They just don't expect Black fathers to be very involved. Saying you're involved doesn't prove that you are involved. So, I volunteer at school games. I put on a nice dress pants and shirt when it's time for P.T.A [Parent-Teacher Association] meetings … I might even try to talk to teachers after school about my kid … just 'cause I want them to recognise me and know that I am not sleeping on the fatherhood job … You have to show them that you are a good Black father …

Like a number of other fathers in the study, Tony expresses distinctiveness through peculiar class comportment and performances of a 'good' Black masculinity. By his account, being different in a positive sense can mean donning professional attire for school meetings, participating in school-wide events, organising meetings with teachers outside of structured P.T.A. meetings and volunteering in the management of school sports sessions. Such intensive engagement can prove useful for limiting his association with pejorative perceptions of Black fatherhood and heightening teachers' attention to

his distinctiveness and possibly the child's. Throughout the study, the involvement of 'good Black father[s]' is often strongly associated with performances of middle-class identity, even if one does not have possession of middle-class resources. For example, a 39-year-old carpenter, Winston explains:

> I don't know a lot about what schools are like now, and what the exams are like, but I know there's another test that I am taking. To pass that test, you don't need money … You don't need to know everything. You just need to speak up, dress up good, build relationships with these principals and teachers—that's how you pass the test. When you pass, you can help your kids pass too …

Although distinctiveness, as understood by Tony and other participants, is framed as a set of class performances that can influence teachers' perceptions, the occasional, individual acts are limited in their reach and impact. While acts of distinctiveness are useful for acknowledging and deflecting existing stereotypes about Black fathers, the results reveal that the perspectives held by participants often reinforced the views they sought to undo (Bradshaw et al. 1999). These fathers both resisted and reified the racialised gender stereotypes by distancing themselves from disengaged Black fathers. Their efforts to identify themselves as 'responsible' Black fathers, may separate them as special individuals, but does little, if anything, to challenge the racialised power structures that necessitate distinctiveness. CRT suggests that individual acts of resistance are largely futile if unhinged from a wider socio-political movement geared towards challenging stereotypes *and* social structures. As a result, participants collude with the power structures that denigrate Black fathers locally and nationally. Individual distinctiveness, no matter how strategic, does not alter structural disadvantage and white supremacy impeding the lives of Black fathers (Bell 1992; Soloranzo 1998).

Deference: an investment in resistance

The second salient strategy deployed by Black Caribbean fathers in this study is what I characterise as deference. All participants, irrespective of class background, suggested that they held a sense of respect in their initial engagement with school officials in London and NYC. Nine out of 10 fathers called on their own childhood experiences with teachers in the 1970s and 1980s in the Caribbean as frames of reference for negotiating contemporary relationships with teachers in foreign contexts (Chevannes 2002). Jermaine, a 43-year-old Grenadian-born construction worker based in South London, honed his appreciation for schools and teaching staff based on his encounters with teachers in his primary school. He notes:

> … When I came to Britain, I didn't really know much about life here, but I knew the school system in Grenada was based on the school system here. Back home we had to show respect to our teachers. Parents showed respect to teachers. So, when my daughter started to go to school here, I treated the teachers in London just like I treated teachers in Gouyave [a region of Grenada] … I really didn't believe in doing anything else.

Jermaine's expressions of deference ought not be reduced to a naïve unfamiliarity with the host society. Participants suggest that deference, or what they termed as 'respect', was often a calculated and culturally significant approach to engaging school teachers and leaders. Not unlike Jermaine, Gary, a 40-year-old elementary school teacher based in

Brooklyn, learned to value the authority of teachers as a result of his schooling in Antigua. Gary points out:

> I'm a teacher, so I'm a bit biased. But before I became a teacher, I always thought it was good to show teachers respect. That's just how I was raised back home. Nowadays, plenty of people curse teachers and abuse them, but that's not what life was like when I was growing up … I notice that when I meet Caribbean parents during school meetings, there is a sense of respect, a sense of honour that I get from the parents. Not everyone does it, but lots of West Indian [Caribbean] parents do that to me, and I definitely show respect to my son's teachers. I want them to show respect to him.

In a political context that often assumes deviance and disengagement of Black fathers (Howard 2013; Reynolds, Howard, and Jones 2015), participants like Gary summon 'respect' to not only showcase their communicative competencies or call on approaches from their past without purpose. They draw on childhood experiences of respectful engagement with teachers to inspire comparable responses from teachers who may support the academic progress of their children. In other words, fathers like Gary are as committed to replicating respectful interactions with teachers as they are invested in the benefits they can yield. Fathers like Peter, a 46-year-old technician working in North London, underscore the value of 'respect' for forging relationships that can influence his daughter's trajectory.

> … I don't know much, but I know that these kinds of relationships with the teachers are like money. When I feel like the teachers are rude, or acting stank, as my daughter would say, I just remember that I should treat them how I want them to treat my daughter … The ways teachers were with me back home is really not like how teachers are here. But, I give these teachers what I want for my daughter's future …

Based on the reports from participants, like the extracts noted above, deference is a political strategy that serves at least three purposes: (1) facilitating practices of engagement based on personal and historical experiences of schooling, (2) subordinating a form of racialised gender fundamentalism that fixes disrespect and disengagement with Black masculinity, particularly in urban contexts and (3) bargaining for relational resources that aid in the advancement of their children. CRT rejects homogenous views of resistance, and recognises multiple practices of subversion that inform activism and commitments to social justice. Accordingly, the deference displayed by the participants should not be mistaken as reflections of ethnic identity or cultural upbringing. Instead, deference should also be understood as dynamic and deliberate attempts to resist subordination.

Domination: trading microaggressions

Participants contend that despite their deference and distinctiveness, they occasionally experienced discrimination in the form of racial microaggressions from teachers, especially white female teachers. Patterns from the data suggest that such instances are not simply past events, or one-off occurrences, but repeated ongoing offences with cascading effects. In proposing the term microaggressions while CRT was still in its infancy, Pierce (1974) characterised it as:

> assaults to black dignity and black hope [that] are incessant and cumulative … In fact, the major vehicle for racism in this country is offenses done to blacks by whites in this sort of

> gratuitous never-ending way. These offenses are microaggressions. Almost all black-white racial interactions are characterized by white put-downs, done in automatic, preconscious, or unconscious fashion … . (515)

Pierce's (1974) influential frame about commonplace daily indignities that slight and subordinate minoritised groups is not exclusive to race. Microaggressions are diverse and divisive, whether based on race, gender, sexual orientation or any other form of social difference. Although there has been considerable research on racial microaggressions, far less attention has been devoted to gender microaggressions, and the at times reciprocal relationship between racial and gender microaggressions. The extract below illustrates how racial microaggressions can beget gender microaggressions. This kind of microaggression mismatch can limit Black fathers' involvement in schools, and simultaneously ignite teachers' anxieties around engaging Black fathers as aggressive and intimidating figures. Harvey, a Letting Agency Manager based in South London, explains that:

> … Yesterday, I had a meeting at Newton, and I saw my daughter's form teacher, a white British lady, and she said to me, 'Oh, we're so glad you're such a good example of a father. You know, you're a rare kind. How come you're so different?' She then pulled me aside and said, 'You know, you should run a class for other Black fathers to learn from you … ' To be honest, yeah, I was so angry when she said that. I thought to myself, she's taking the piss … That's why I really don't like to get too involved … these teachers start to pass their place, then I have to show them that I'm a man. They can't play with me.
>
> Interviewer: I understand. So, what did you say to her?
>
> Harvey: … I said to her, 'Oh, well you're rare too, aren't you? There are not a lot of white women who care enough to notice me as a good Black father … . You should run a class for other white ladies to identify good Black fathers … '
>
> Interviewer: What did she say to that?
>
> Harvey: I started to laugh and so she laughed too. That's how you deal with things in this country. You can't afford to be the angry Black man … the teacher might avoid me. And who knows? May be they would avoid my children …

Harvey's response is not a rare case. NYC-based Clive also used gender microaggressions to counter racial ones. He argues:

> Some of my son's teachers are feisty. But, listen man, I'm no punk. I'm not gonna let no white girl talk to me like I'm an idiot … The other day, I was angry and I pointed to her [one of his son's teacher] and told her that she better be glad she has a job because a woman like her should be cooking and cleaning for a man like me.

Similarly, Paul uses gender microaggressions to retaliate against white female teachers' expressions of racism. Paul, who has been married for 10 years to his partner of 19 years, explains that his appeals for distinctiveness at times result in offensive encounters with teachers. The following extract from an interview with Paul demonstrates why he used gender microaggressions in response to what he presumed to be racial insults.

> During the last parent-teacher meeting, my wife and I went together … One teacher that we've seen and worked with before said to us, 'We're just so happy to see you both. We don't usually have two parents attend.' She looked at my wife and said, 'you're lucky

he came. How did you bribe him? Fathers like him don't usually come … ' She started to laugh.

Interviewer: What did you say to her?

Paul: My wife was about to answer her, but I decided to. I don't think mothers should be the only ones attending these meetings. That's not how we do things in the Caribbean, not really in our culture … but when teachers say stupid things like that, why would more fathers come?

Interviewer: I understand. So, what did you say to her?

Paul: I just told her that no one bribed me … I'm here because I want [my child] to do well … She said it was just a joke and that I shouldn't be so sensitive. I think I said something like 'I guess you're here late at night to have a laugh. When you become a woman and have some children, you'll think twice about what you say to fathers.'

Interviewer: Do you think you could have handled it differently?

Paul: Probably. But in the moment, I needed her to respect me as a man, and not play around.

Paul and Harvey's responses underscore the fact that gender microaggressions can become ways for Black Caribbean fathers to assert masculine authority in the face of racial antagonism. This is an example of what I refer to as divergent microaggressions – two distinct forms of microaggressions (racial and gender) instigated in one encounter to further denigrate historically subordinated groups (e.g. women and Black men). These are the oft-unnamed complexities of everyday life. Although Paul expressed a desire to move beyond rigid gender scripts that hold school engagement as fundamentally women's work in 'Caribbean cultures', Paul links the teacher's womanhood with child-bearing and childrearing. To this end, Paul, at once, holds progressive and regressive views of women's roles in society, depending on the social context. In the face of racial microaggressions pedalled by white women, Black masculine dominance can counteract individual acts of racism (Seaton et al. 2008; Sigelman and Tuch 1997).

But microaggressions can operate in a more complicated fashion than has been detailed above. In the extract that follows, two forms of microaggression (racism and classism) are deployed by teachers to undermine working-class Black immigrant fathers, for which there is no retribution. To this end, not all participants offer the situational responses that Paul, Harvey and Clive do. Winston, for instance, seemed so deeply invested in performances of distinctiveness and deference that he strategically endured the multiple microaggressions he encountered during school visits. He explains:

… the other day, I was running late from work and decided that I would just go to the school in my work clothes so I could catch the concert my son invited me to. All these white teachers at the door wouldn't stop looking me up and down, like they were afraid and disgusted … Another man walked in after me and I didn't see anyone looking at him. But I'm a tall and heavy Black man, may be that was it … when my son came and gave me a dap [hand greeting], some senior person walk[ed] over and said to my son, how do you know this man? Is he trying to sell you anything? My son said, 'this is my father'. I was proud that my son didn't disown me, but felt so ashamed in the school …

Interviewer: Then what happened? What did you say?

Winston: I just said it's okay.

In addition to illustrating how racialised assumptions (about illegal sales) and class judgements (based on dress codes) reflect convergent microaggressions, this example also reveals the power of teachers and school authorities to further alienate minoritised fathers. CRT is not solely about identifying prejudicial legal precedents that undermine People of Colour. It is also about identifying and interrupting informal laws of 'race', class and gender that limit the institutional involvement of historically marginalised groups. CRT in education questions teachers' racialised and gendered determinations of some Black fathers as 'good' and white women's power as fair agents of authority in majority–minority urban schools (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). As an intellectual and political project, CRT acknowledges the complex, interlocking relationships between racism and sexism, recognising that trading diverse forms of microaggressions only fortifies oppressive structures in educational institutions and limits coalition building. Substantive transformation therefore requires a commitment to considering the examples of the participants as valuable cases that receive little critical consideration in schools – particularly ones functioning without strong race-conscious and gender-sensitive curricula, teaching and staff training.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the strategies Black Caribbean immigrant fathers draw on when engaging with white female teachers in public schools to support the advancement of their children. This case study of immigrant and second-generation Black Caribbean fathers in London and NYC addresses an underexplored area of research by linking US and UK myths and discourses on Black fatherhood to illustrate how racial microaggressions complicate some father engagement with urban schools in global cities. In keeping with CRT (Hayes, Montes, and Schroeder 2013), I centre the voices and views of Black Caribbean immigrant fathers to underscore experiences of microaggression mismatch, and the charged, complex exchanges of microaggressions such as divergent microaggressions and convergent microaggressions. Given the dearth of scholarship on the positive engagement of Black fathers with public schools, this paper provides an analytical intervention that challenges fixed, deficit perspectives on Black fatherhood.

Schools in London and NYC stand to benefit from increased and sustained engagement of Black fathers. Outreach efforts will be most effective and enduring if they de-pathologise representations of Black fathers – and all marginalised groups, for that matter. There are at least three core strategies that can assist teachers and school leaders pursuing these ends. Firstly, schools should diversify the leadership of their PTAs and Outreach Boards to deliberately involve Black fathers, immigrant mothers and guardians in the governance of schools. Secondly, leaders of urban schools with significant immigrant enrolment should host special listening campaigns to learn the needs and aspirations of immigrant parents; the most innovative and impactful strategies can come from affected parties in local settings. Finally, teachers should be formally trained as part of their professional development to express high expectations of all fathers and encourage parent-leaders in schools. If these suggestions are considered as guiding best practices, urban schools can function as more inclusive spaces that benefit Black fathers, white female teachers and the children they support.

Note

1. Throughout this paper, I use the term 'public school' to refer to government-managed schools, or what would be called 'state schools' in the UK.

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