Bridging the Gap: Using Bourdieu and Critical Race Theory to Understand the Importance of Black Middle-Class Parents' Educational Aspirations for Their Children

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Introduction

Over the last three decades there has been very little research on black middle-class families, in contrast to the many studies exploring the underachievement of black working-class students in urban areas (Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Archer 2003; Platt 2007). As a result, far less is known about the black middle class, and even less about black middle-class parents' aspirations for their children. One of the first pieces of research to cast a more nuanced picture of black middle-class experiences with schooling was conducted by Rollock et al. (2012) on Caribbean-heritage middle-class families. They found five distinct groupings: 'comfortably middle class', 'middle class ambivalent', 'working class with qualifications', 'working class' and, a final group, 'interrogators'. They observed a fluidity between these black middle-class groups due to patterns of identification and dis-identification influenced by limited forms of inclusion based on white middle-class expectations of social mobility. Rollock et al.'s *The Colour of Class* (2015) further explored how race and class influence the identities of Caribbean parents and their children in a 'dominant white middle-class' society. Rollock et al.'s research concerning how professional parents managed class advantages and racial disadvantages whilst supporting their children through school provided the inspiration for my current research.

My qualitative study of 25 African and Caribbean parents sought to explore differences in black middle-class parents' strategies and decision making in regard to their children's

futures. Conducted in 2015, the research focused on the growing African and Caribbean middle class in London I call 'the Stayers' and those who had moved out of London to reside in predominantly white Kent, known in the study as 'the Movers'. Thirteen of the 25 parents interviewed came from a working-class family background and the other 12 parents came from established middle-class families. Of the 25 parents interviewed, 15 parents had made the decision to move outside of London. As the aim of the study was to understand the strategies and practices adopted by black professional middle-class parents to pursue their aspirations for their children's education, the research explored the extent to which the strategies were linked to parents' perceptions of opportunities, risks and barriers they believed their children were likely to face in British society. Furthermore, the research highlighted that parental practices were commonly influenced by parents' social and economic backgrounds. Specifically, in the data there was evidence that parental aspirations for their children were influenced by the parents' knowledge of the labour market as well as their historical, economic, social and cultural experiences of being black in Britain. However, whilst Bourdieu's approach to social practices offers a useful tool to understand the dispositions and strategies taken by black middle-class parents, I find that Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit does not always fully explain the interactions between racialized and class experiences (Rollock et al. 2015).

In this chapter, I extend Bourdieu's work on the reproduction of class by incorporating CRT to highlight the influence of race and racism as well as to legitimate class positioning among the black middle classes in what has been a predominantly white middle-class focused area of scholarship (Ball et al. 2011). It should be noted that professed Bourdieusian scholars (in the context of educational research) have only tenuously engaged with the multiple dimensions of ethnically and economically stratified systems linked to radicalized forms of social capital, such as availability of resources, mobilization of family networks, and opportunities to forge

connections through social mobility (Vincent et al. 2012a). Therefore, to further explore the extent to which Bourdieu's concepts of capitals are applicable in the analysis of racial identities and aspirations of black middle-class groups in the UK, this investigation required a bridging approach that combined Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital with theories about race.

Throughout my research, I defined parents' aspirations as a culture of hopeful possibilities and outcomes that go beyond their past experiences and present circumstances for the future benefit of their children. Similar to Rollock et al. (2015), my research highlights how parents' aspirations are formulated through their lived experiences of postcolonial institutional structures and current socio-economic situations. These structure and situations in turn contribute to the way parents navigate a racialized education system for their children. In conducting this research, I relied mainly on Bourdieu's theory of capital to understand how and why parents use these strategies to achieve their aspirations for their children. Capital, for Bourdieu, exists in the forms of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals used in the daily lives of individuals. They are used as strategies of reproduction that serve to legitimize structures that confer advantage within society. In understanding Bourdieu's theory of capital, I saw how the parents in my study strategized to ensure the best outcomes for their children. However, a focus on capital alone did not highlight race and the nuanced forms of racism which emerged in the data, and this drew me towards CRT. For example, the parents I labelled the Movers, who possessed high levels of economic capital, chose to leave London and relocate to parts of Kent. Not only did they have the resources and finances to move out, my research showed they found the move meaningful to them in terms of social advancement and securing a good position for their children. The main focus of this chapter is to show how I created a bridge between the social theory of Bourdieu and CRT to analyse how parents' aspirations for their children were formed and *expressed*. Combining these two theories

brought to the surface the more salient narratives of parents' everyday classed and raced experiences within the education system.

Bridging Bourdieu and Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Bourdieu's (1983, 1996) theory of class analysis proposed a framework in which social and educational inequalities can be understood as being contextually produced through the interactions of forms of capital within the field of education. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has had a particular influence on critiques of the inequalities of white privilege and norms in the British education system. It refers to the general cultural background and skills possessed by an individual, such as linguistic ability, cultural knowledge of art, taste, and shared norms and values. Cultural background is linked with class because (according to Bourdieu) it is influenced by (and influences) economic standing. Based on Bourdieusian logic, if this is the case, how can ethnic groups acquire dominant cultural capital if they do not start on a level playing field with the white majority? For example, Wacquant (2008) found that Americans living in hyper-segregated ghettos have fewer and less dense social ties/networks and have considerably less volume of all forms of capital. Differential distribution of capitals in the United States has been created through the legitimization and naturalization of the hierarchy that elevates white culture at the expense of others (Swartz 1998). The overall premise of this chapter is that researchers who work at the nexus of race and social class should consider engaging Bourdieu's conceptual tools with the particular *social* strengths of CRT.

Within Bourdieu's theoretical approach, social capital refers to forms of social participation and connection such as membership of network groups, communities and families. It has been argued that these forms of social capital are important resources for social mobility and extremely relevant to the discussion of black middle-class aspirations and family support mechanisms that cultivate self-confidence in black middle-class children (Vincent and

Maxwell 2016). For example, Bourdieu's conceptual tools have been extended for an analysis of parenting practices that included the investigation of gender, class and race (Reay 2004; Wallace 2016). However, an overwhelming majority of research by Bourdieusian scholars fails to challenge assumptions of white dominant normalcy. That proved to be an inadequate perspective for the analysis of my data on the high expectations and aspirations of the Movers. Yosso (2005: 77) argues that such an application of Bourdieu's tools creates a deficit model of marginalized groups. Therefore, my application of CRT (using CRT's tenets discussed below) as a second lens beside a Bourdieusian schema is an effort to counteract any potential deficit approaches, placing race at the centre of my research, and providing a more nuanced approach to analysing black middle-class parents aspirations for their children through drawing on the various capitals at their disposal to secure advantage.

Briefly, there are five tenets of CRT. Firstly, CRT regards racism as so deeply entrenched in the social order that it is often taken for granted and viewed as natural (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Secondly, creating and reinforcing racial subordination and maintaining a normalized position of white privilege is a central focus of the analysis of racial inequality (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Harris 1995). Thirdly, CRT places particular importance on the stories and experiences of racism and marginalization. Fourth is the tenet of interest convergence, where the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites (Bell 1980: 523). Lastly, the fifth principle in CRT is intersectionality, whereby in complex and multiple ways various systems of subordination synthesize to discriminate against and disadvantage a group of people (Crenshaw 1989). Issues such as historical and socio-political context are taken into account while still maintaining awareness of racial inequalities.

Scholars in the United Kingdom have adopted CRT to explore the historical black working-class population in Britain, who continue to experience racism, including institutional racism

(Gillborn and Mirza 2000). Gillborn et al.'s (2012) findings reveal that, despite their material and cultural capital, many middle-class black Caribbean parents find their high expectations of their children thwarted by racist stereotyping and exclusion. Speaking with both African and Caribbean parents, I found they conversed openly regarding the levels of discrimination, marginalization and subtle forms of mis-interpretations of their middle-class identities and these accounts occurred everywhere, from the conversations at the school gates to their work environments.

CRT scholars adopt this theoretical approach to explore how racialized patterns of power through discrimination and oppression feed levels of social power that privilege some whilst marginalizing others. CRT challenges the traditional interpretation of cultural capital and applies the lens of race to highlight practices of marginalization and discrimination across a range of social institutions (Yosso 2005). In sociological theory, CRT regards race as a social construction and analyses the connections between race, racism, privilege and power that affect both class and gender (Delgado and Stefancic 2001, Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso 2000). Therefore CRT's framework, the tenets, allows for an exploration of the complex dimension of race, which provides a more focused and nuanced interpretation of aspirations and social life amongst black middle-class families than the single conceptual lens of Bourdieu's analysis (Vincent et al. 2012b). Specifically, CRT's focus on the primacy of race and racism allows us to recognize the structural, socio-economic and historical nature of racial inequality in the education system (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). CRT enables a more critical analysis, enlarging the scope to shed light on the 'images, preconceptions, and myths – that have been propagated by the dominant culture of hegemonic Whiteness as a way of maintaining racial inequality' (Trevino, Harris and Wallace 2012: 8). Interestingly, throughout the research, the Movers uniquely defined themselves outside of the social constructs of 'race' (which thoughtlessly predefined and negated their middle-class existence). They used words such as

'aristocratic', 'diplomat' and 'highly educated and professional heritage' to describe their class realities which, in turn, assisted in constructing a narrative that instilled both social and cultural aspirations for their children.

Black middle class operationalizing capital

According to Lareau and Horvat (1999), black middle-class parents may experience different sets of acceptable spaces based on white privilege. The concept of acceptance involves an understanding of the complex interplay between race, class and cultural capital. In my study, black middle-class parents in Britain, who possessed high volumes of economic, social and cultural capital, faced a similar struggle for legitimation based on race despite having high aspirations. Bourdieu's theory of social capital allowed me to analyse parents' aspirational aims for their children in order to understand the strategies they use to preserve their social and cultural capital, suggesting that economic capital was only part of a wider strategy when it came to the reproduction of middle-class status (Reay 2010). Wallace (2016) argues that black middle-class Caribbean pupils use their black cultural capital to challenge widespread stigmatization and homogenization of black identities in school by acquiring bodies of knowledge and dispositions to improve their academic performance. Their use of black cultural capital in the classroom for example (viewed as an 'acceptable space'), ultimately enhanced their relationships with teachers to elevate their class status.

Speaking with the parents, it was clear that high levels of social, cultural and economic capital enabled them to make the move to Kent. Furthermore, the Movers believed that they would enhance their chances of social advancement through moving outside of London. Such a strategic move contributed to shaping aspirations for their children. The main reason the Movers became geographically mobile was to gain access to schools they perceived as better quality, with only two parents of the fifteen moving out of London because of job promotions. In terms of education and opportunity there was a common aspiration and

strategizing around time, as over half of the Movers relocated when their children were under the age of 11 with the 'expectation' their children would pass the 11 plus exam and attend a selective grammar school in Kent. The Movers demonstrate the nuanced navigations around the acquisition and maintenance of cultural capital. At this point Bourdieu's tools do not entirely reveal the social reality of black middle-class aspirations or the intersections of raced and classed experiences. There is a need here for a more engaging and less 'light touch' approach to understanding race and racial experience through a selective appropriation of Bourdieu's tools alongside a CRT perspective.

Applying Bourdieu's Tools and CRT to the 'Movers'

This section draws on empirical data from the study to show how I created a bridge between Bourdieu and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to provide a more extensive analytical framework to uncover the strategies of black middle-class parents and the impediments they experienced in moving outside of London. In the following account, I show how one mother, Mary, a single parent and marketing director, decided to purchase a house in Kent in order to secure her the future of her daughter Shelly.

Mary is a highly successful marketing director who was based in London and came from a line of high achievers in her middle-class Nigerian family. As a single mother, she made what she described as a 'calculated decision' to buy a house in Kent in order to get her daughter Shelly, who was mixed race, into a secondary grammar school with the ultimate intention of moving back to London once her daughter started university. Mary recalled that her friends thought that the move was a bold step, as she was going out on her own with Shelley with no support networks, and questioned why she could not just find a reputable school in London and be around 'people like us'. Mary's networks believed that 'out there' (in Kent) there are not enough black families and they were concerned about the level of racism both Mary and Shelly might encounter. However, Mary described her decision as 'an educational

investment'. She reflected on the types of conversations she had with Shelly when they first arrived: 'Stick by those children who are in the top sets and get top marks and talk about having aspirations to go to a grammar school. Position yourself amongst that group – you know, like-minded and thinking people.'

The advice given to Shelly to position herself amongst 'that group' illustrates a traditional Bourdieusian class analysis where class differences are reinforced through the education system, as seen in previous research (Rollock et al. 2012; Archer 2012; Vincent et al. 2012a). Shelly was placed in a position of having to conform to and understand patterns of white middle-class identity within her all-white peer group where her 'feel for the game' was tied closely to knowing the right way of doing things (Bourdieu 1986). In terms of aspirations, Mary had already decided Shelley's career path and believed that being in the 'top sets' and associating with 'like-minded and thinking people' would help preserve their social status. However, early in her time living in Kent, Mary discovered that she had to assert her class position in order to establish her middle-class status and gain a certain level of respect. In an anecdote, Mary described an informal conversation she had with another parent at the school gate:

> One day I came straight from work and they were staring with curiosity. One mum asked me where have you been? I said I had a meeting and came after work.
>
> Mum: Oh! What do you do?
>
> Mary: I am a marketing consultant [big smile]
>
> Mum: Oh, so you've been to university then?
>
> Mary: Yeah, sure. I graduated back in 1995, and that sort of thing, so I've excelled in the profession.

As a black middle-class professional, Mary felt strongly that she should not have endured that level of scrutiny. Furthermore, she believed that she had to announce her middle classness in a specific way in order to be accepted. Mary, in knowing what was important to other middle-class mothers, operationalized her cultural capital to express her identity as an educated, working professional. Mary's experience illustrates that the state of being black and middle class, and the use of black cultural, economic and social capital, was observed with an element of scepticism. Despite Mary's professional status, she was still subject to the stereotypical perception of the 'black single mother' being a deficient parent. As Mary was born and raised in a middle-class context, she knew what was valued in the field and operationalizing her cultural capital strategically to gain respectability and legitimacy among the white middle-class mothers. By operationalizing Bourdieu's theoretical approach, Mary's narrative connects strongly with how capitals are deployed to secure or heighten one's position. While Bourdieu's tools are useful, they do not necessarily go deep enough to explain the significant impact different levels of dominant social spaces have upon black middle-class parents, where struggles for legitimation of class and power persist. According to CRT, struggles like the one Mary experienced are multiplied within the social context of race and space. This was a recurrent theme with the parents I spoke with: even though they all defined themselves as high achievers and professionals in their field, their degree of privilege was not perceived to have the same value as that of their white counterparts.

Discussion

The Movers described London as a place of distraction for their children and they felt they needed to move out of London to get away from influential peer groups. Seeking a place in a grammar school was a popular choice for these middle-class parents as they felt it would be a good academic start to support their aspirations for their children's professional career path.

By moving to residential areas in which they form a distinct minority, black pupils and their families face the prospect of isolation and disengagement from predominantly white middle-class communities. As a result of this isolation, support networks of family, friends and churches, both in Kent and in London, were widely used, which highlights another function of social capital that is underexplored in a Bourdieusian approach. There is an increased likelihood that children from these families will experience racism at school, or indeed struggle to find representations of themselves among their peers or teachers; yet these parents were prepared to take a risk in order to secure their children's futures. However, as we see in Mary's story, and as was generally true amongst other Movers in the study, these black middle-class parents were able to operationalize their various capitals. Through operationalizing such capitals, the parents reinforced their middle class-ness and identity within white middle-class spaces. The participants in this study were highly ambitious parents, many of whom had a clearly defined professional career path for their children. Despite some unfortunate experiences in their move to Kent, the parents I interviewed maintained high aspirations for their children and went out of their way to provide them with the resources and academic support they needed to achieve success.

Many other Movers spoke about occasions where they or their children experienced harassment. Parents felt that their children were initially misrepresented by teachers' assumptions that being black meant you were working class, predominantly from single parent homes and among the weaker students. The participants spoke of black children being more quickly labelled as the 'trouble maker' in the group as well as being more likely to be singled out within their peer group (by teachers and the local police). This also highlights the utility of the CRT tenet that white assumptions and stereotypes become part of black parents' and children's everyday experiences simply based on the colour of their skin. In predominantly white Kent, the parents also talked openly about how as parents they

instructed their children not to mix with the wrong crowd and were very particular about whom their children associated with. For example, Roger (a senior social worker) and Mary (featured in this chapter) were very protective for fear of 'contamination' by the behaviour of the white working-class, labelled in the area as 'Chavs', or negative peer influence by other black children labelled as black 'ghetto' types (see Archer 2012 for further discussion). However, intertwined with these negative experiences and safeguarding against risk, some of the parents I interviewed voiced how they often felt a sense of belonging (e.g. 'I wanted them to get to like me': Tayo, a mother of two who moved to a small village community as part of the only black family in the village).

The misrepresentation of black members of society – through stereotyping them as working class – can be interpreted as a way to legitimate the symbolic location of power and class privilege within the white middle class (Archer 2012; Wallace this volume). CRT identifies the taken-for-granted centrality of white assumptions about what constitutes the white middle class. While the professional occupations of these parents in my study symbolize levels of power and class privilege, the abundant mis-perceptions of black middle-class professional status described in the study arguably denies this middle-class group their professional authenticity. Such misrecognition of black cultural capital (Wallace 2016) extends to their children and causes the academic ability of their children to be questioned due to racialized and classed inequalities in education. Given their level of investment, parents expressed concern about the educational and social disadvantage they perceived their children would experience.

Bourdieusian notions of class distinction, the operationalization of capitals and the field of education as a competitive route to preserving social position has indeed been a productive tool in my analysis of black middle-class parents' strategies to secure the success of their children. Parents interviewed felt the need to validate and legitimize their capitals in order to

compete in the social field of education. Mary's experience highlights the use of CRT's centring of race, and its reminder that what is valued as resourceful capital should not be judged from a white norm. The incorporation of CRT tenets in experiential knowledge research in a bridge with Bourdieu's tools provides a valuable contribution. With the Movers, the analysis required a more nuanced understanding of (black) racialized middle classness on which the idea of 'people like us' or 'wanting similar things' for their children is constructed alongside white privilege and legitimacy (Rollock et al. 2012).

In thinking critically about the Movers and their experiences in Kent, it should be noted that for Bourdieu inequalities are never static and require an appreciation of complex historical and contemporary intersections of black middle-class groups in the field of education. CRT explicitly explores race, class and gender positionings within black families, linking historical and current injustices that continue to be reflected in education in terms of genuine social mobility (Crenshaw 1989; Delgado and Stefancic 2001). When theorizing about the importance of education through black middle-class experiences, one needs to be mindful of the relational and shifting existence of race, class and gender. Although Bourdieu's approach to education has the capacity to highlight the inequalities of social reproduction of class via structure, agency and the relevant fields, the theoretical tools need to be extended to incorporate those who are racially marginalized irrespective of their middle-class status. The narrow focus of Bourdieusian scholars arguably misses the opportunity to address the issues of genuine struggles over race and racialized barriers to social mobility.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to illustrate the theoretical potential of using a combined approach of Bourdieu's tools and principles of CRT to further our understanding of black middle-class parents' strategic use of economic, social and cultural capital to instill aspirations for their children. Throughout the research, it was clear the parents wanted a 'better quality of life'

and for their children 'to do better' and 'achieve more than they ever had'. Despite levels of difference and displacement in the suburbs of Kent, the Movers felt that geographical mobility was a 'worthy investment' for their children's education. While their friends thought it was a brave decision to leave London and become a 'minority within a minority' and probed their reasoning due to the pervasiveness of racism and the dominant association of middle classness with whiteness in British society, the Movers expressed determination to 'succeed', representing aspirations that are determined by the resourceful use of black cultural capital (Wallace 2016) in the contemporary landscape of Kent. Equipped with degrees and professional occupations, high economic capital and distinct flexible forms of social and cultural capital, it is clear the Movers embody, to varying degrees of success, the ability to strategically calculate their use of capital and find effective ways to 'play the game'. By operationalizing their capitals, they attempt to navigate beyond the social constructions of race, gender and class constructed through *mis*-conceptions of professional identities aligned to white normalcy.

Creating a bridge between Bourdieu's tools and CRT provides a useful theoretical approach to sensitively analysing how black middle-class parents deploy capitals to maintain and secure advantage. The empirical narratives of second-generation Movers and an engagement with Bourdieu's concepts unearthed how class, race and gender intertwine within the context of educational aspirations to influence parents' strategic decisions for their children's futures. My research on the aspirations that black middle-class parents have for their children and the strategies they employ to achieve these aspirations uncovered a more elusive and internalized sense of legitimacy, entitlement and acceptance as well as more hidden forms of class consciousness in relation to being black and middle class in a predominantly white geographical area.

Recommended Further Reading

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