

**PAPER 3**

The role of **intergenerational trauma** in the lives and experiences of Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities in Britain

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# Introduction

Intergenerational trauma, defined as “the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding that is transmitted from one generation to the next” (Cerdeña et al., 2021), is increasingly recognised as a global phenomenon with significant implications for individuals and families. While substantial literature exists globally, particularly in the U.S., British research has often overlooked the transmission and effects of trauma within Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities. Despite being disproportionately exposed to trauma, adversity, and systemic inequality, these communities remain underrepresented in both academic research and practical intervention frameworks. This paper explores the conceptualisation of intergenerational trauma in the British context, examines the roles of racism, poverty, and mental ill-health, and evaluates the extent to which existing literature and interventions address the specific needs of Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic families.

## Conceptualising intergenerational trauma in Britain

In the British context, racism is rarely treated as a direct contributor to intergenerational trauma, with few studies exploring how experiences of interpersonal and systemic racism affect parenting, family dynamics, or children’s development (EIF, 2022; Kirkinis et al., 2021). This literature suggests that trauma experienced by a parent is often difficult to recognise and thus goes untreated (Lewis et al., 2019), thereby increasing the likelihood of transmission of unresolved trauma from parent to child (Isobel et al., 2019). This transmission is reinforced through parents’ behaviours and teachings, which can normalise potentially harmful, trauma-informed actions. Whilst parents do not intentionally pass down trauma or necessarily mean to harm their children (Isobel et al., 2019), unresolved experiences of trauma can impact the next generation unless early recognition, support and intervention is made accessible (Assink et al., 2018; Isobel et al., 2019).

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There have been several British studies that have focused on the transmission of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) to the next generation, through the lens of the parent-child transmission (Lai et al., 2019; Lacey et al., 2020). The Millenium cohort (2020) study for instance comprehensively addressed how adverse childhood experiences often cluster and then passed down onto the next generation, pinpointing the multi-layered adversities that one person or one family could be experiencing (Lai et al., 2019). The attention paid to ACE's being passed down has been helpful, however it has also resulted in less attention paid to how other forms of trauma are passed down. Exploration of ACEs has primarily focused on what parents pass down to their children. Such an approach also often fails to hold structural factors and inequalities often caused by institutional racism accountable for its role in childhood trauma, risking an understanding of trauma that focuses on the role solely of families and poor parenting practices (Cerdeña et al., 2021).

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There has been greater recognition that parents' ability to be good parents is highly influenced by the environment and external social and economic factors around them. However this is not always considered in the literature on intergenerational trauma (Assink et al., 2018; EIF, 2022; Adjei et al., 2022). For instance, Assink and colleagues (2018) advise caution when focusing solely on parent to child or maternal transmission as this can unfairly place blame on individual parenting practices while overlooking the role of systemic inequality and discrimination in perpetuating trauma across generations. Evidence has also suggested that the passing down of trauma is not always linear and that the effects and experience may appear different depending on an individual's response to trauma/s sustained (Isobel et al., 2019).



# Racism and intergenerational trauma

In the British context, racism is rarely treated as a direct contributor to intergenerational trauma. Few studies explore how experiences of interpersonal and systemic racism affect parenting, family dynamics, or children's development (Prady et al, 2014; Kirkinis et al., 2021; EIF, 2022). There is some evidence to suggest that fathers from minoritised ethnic backgrounds who have experienced interpersonal racism are more likely to express anger and frustration in the home against their children and partners (Bécares et. al, 2015; EIF, 2022). This work highlights the ways in which racism may impact the parent-child relationship, children's development and affect others beyond the direct victim of racism. Less is known about how this impact's the next generation in the short and long term.



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Recently, the Centre for Mental Health (2023) conducted a study about the impact of racism on minoritised ethnic families, exploring the relationship between parents' experiences of racism and children's experiences of racism. The study found that racism had a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of both parents and children. It also found that parents act in proactive ways to prepare their children for experiences of racism by sharing messages about being alert and cautious to ensure their safety, messages which are based on their own experiences of racism (CMH, 2023). Due to the limited British-based research on how experiences of racism, both interpersonal and systemic, affect the next generation, further investigation is necessary to explore this relationship.



By contrast, U.S.-based literature is far more comprehensive in its treatment of racism as trauma (Anderson and Stevenson, 2019; Comas-Diaz et al., 2019), resulting in a significant amount of literature which critically explores the shared and individual experiences of racism among Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic groups (Gone et al., 2019; Cerdeña et al., 2021; Esaki et al., 2022). This evidence suggests that children are often the forgotten and unintended victims of racial abuse and racism experienced by their parents or family members (Heard-Garris et al 2018), reflecting the inadequate consideration of the wide-reaching and insidious nature and impact of racism in the British literature. For instance, Berry and colleagues (2021) used longitudinal studies to explore how multi-layered and interconnecting experiences of racism impact children and families, finding that that even very young children can be directly impacted by racism and indirectly impacted through their parents' experiences.

The concept of 'racial socialisation' and strategies like 'the talk' are also widely recognised in the U.S. context as adaptive responses to systemic oppression, illustrating the intergenerational impact of racism on parenting and child development (Heard-Garris et al., 2018; Berry et al., 2021). In such strategies, parents attempt to prepare their children for racism through messages of caution and vigilance—practices that are based on their own traumatic experiences. The lack of such frameworks in British research reveals a significant gap in understanding the full scope of trauma experienced by Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities.

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## Poverty and intergenerational trauma

Poverty is a well-documented contributor to childhood adversity and trauma (Lai et al., 2019). A British study identified that poverty and/or poor parental mental health affects over four in ten children and that this often leads to poorer mental health outcomes for children (Adjei et al., 2022). The recognition of the role of poverty in the transmission of trauma attempts to contextualise why parents might have experienced trauma, how this may be passed down or inherited by their children and the challenges in overcoming it (Adjei et al., 2022). This research has helped to re-frame childhood trauma and intergenerational trauma as a social issue caused by systemic inequalities that need to be addressed at a governmental and policy level (Lai et al., 2019; Adjei et al., 2022).

Yet, British literature often fails to recognise the disproportionate burden of deprivation amongst Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic groups or the ways in which systemic barriers perpetuate trauma across generations (Hankerson et al., 2022). There is also limited recognition of how institutional racism shapes this disproportionality (Marmot, 2018). For instance, evidence shows that minoritised ethnic families are more likely to live in areas of poverty because of systemic inequalities and that these inequalities are passed to future generations (Bhui et al., 2018).

## Mental ill health and intergenerational trauma

Mental health plays a critical role in the intergenerational transmission of trauma, with research exploring the extent to which parental mental illness acts as a significant risk factor for childhood trauma (Lai et al., 2019; Lacey et al., 2020). Children of parents with mental illness are at increased risk of developing similar issues, particularly in contexts where support services are limited (Assink et al., 2018; Lai et al., 2019; Lacey et al., 2020). Evidence also indicates that minoritised ethnic parents and families are at heightened risk of poor mental health and depression (Bignall et al., 2019; CMH, 2022). For example, Bécares et al. (2015) found that women from minoritised ethnic groups are more likely to experience mental health disorders compared to White British women (EIF, 2022), while poor mental health among South Asian women has also been found to be closely linked to social and economic disadvantage (Prady et al., 2014). While the literature suggests connections between poverty, mental health, intergenerational trauma, and racism, further research is needed to explore these relationships in greater depth (AVA, 2021).



# Recommendations on how to overcome intergenerational trauma in the existing literature

## Public acknowledgement

U.S. evidence has shown that acceptance and public acknowledgement of racism, trauma and oppression experienced by different minoritised ethnic groups is a significant step in enabling a process of healing (Metzger et al., 2021). Traumas first need to be recognised for support, treatment and interventions to be developed (Lavoie, 2021).

## Families and mitigation

Strong family and community support has been identified as a solution to break and challenge the cycle of intergenerational trauma (Isobel et al., 2019; Cerdeña et al., 2021; Cai and Lee, 2022). There has been wider recognition that parenting is more challenging if parents and families themselves are experiencing multiple adversities and socio-economic hardship (Lai et al, 2019; EIF, 2022). Minoritised ethnic communities may also be more likely to experience these systemic inequalities. Therefore, parents need to be supported so that they can help mitigate the impact of trauma and adversities and decrease the likelihood of transmission. This involves improving services and support around families to ensure all children are raised in a safe and healthy environment (Isobel et al, 2019; EIF, 2022; CMH, 2023).

## Resolving parental trauma

Whilst a growing body of evidence has identified early intervention and resolving parental trauma as means to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma, there has been limited progress in developing practical interventions that are accessible, affordable or inclusive of different lived experiences. More work is required to understand what prevention strategies and interventions could be effective and inclusive for Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic families and communities.





# Conclusion

British research on intergenerational trauma has yet to fully grapple with the lived realities of Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities. By focusing narrowly on parenting and ACEs, such work risks neglecting the structural and historical forces that shape trauma transmission.

Although it is acknowledged that parental trauma must be addressed, there has been little focus on developing practical interventions to help individuals overcome trauma and prevent its transmission, with even less attention paid to the specific needs of minoritised ethnic communities. To create meaningful change, both research and intervention strategies must explicitly consider the roles of racism, poverty, and mental health within intergenerational trauma frameworks.

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