Chapter 1
Introduction

In the U.K. today, Caribbean[1] mothers are much maligned and misunderstood. In current social policy debates the popular perception of Caribbean mothers as strong, independent, self-reliant matriarchs mean that they come under criticism from all sides as bearing the brunt of responsibility for the breakdown of Caribbean family life and male absence from the household. Equally, in the rapidly expanding body of literature on motherhood and mothering, they are generally absent from the debates or are measured against yardsticks that reflect the norms of white middle-class mothers. Rarely, if ever, are Caribbean mothers a subject of study in their own right outside of stereotypical and pathological assumptions. Consequently, we know very little about how Caribbean women construct and understand their mothering. Nor do we know much about these women's experiences as mothers. This book presents an insight into the lives of Caribbean mothers in the U.K. based on the views of the mothers themselves. The research, on which it is based, explores how a range of cultural, historical and structural factors determine the mothers' experiences, identity and practices.

Caribbean mothers, as the central focus of debate in the study, raise new questions about social constructions of mothering. In addition, mothering is revealed to be equally as racialised as it is gendered. Contemporary mothering discourses generally overlook this factor and universalistic claims of mothering are based on white, middle-class, and heterosexual practices. The specific focus of this study also demonstrates that mothering issues that white, (and usually middle-class) mothers have only recently become attentive to (such as balancing and negotiating work and family roles; lone-mothering, kinship/community networks and extended family relationships) are intrinsic to Caribbean mothering and these mothers have long-standing historical experience of these areas. The study documents the experiences of a cross-section of first, second and third generation Caribbean mothers in the U.K. The mothering identity forged and mothering practices performed by these mothers represents their attempts

1 In the U.K. the term 'Caribbean' (also referred to as 'black Caribbean') is an official racial-ethnic category that is used to classify people originating from Caribbean ethnic backgrounds. For the purpose of this study the term 'Caribbean mothers' and 'Caribbean mothering' refers exclusively to African-Caribbean mothers and their mothering experiences. African-Caribbeans (i.e. people of African and Caribbean origin/descent and family heritage) are the largest and most instantly recognisable Caribbean migrant community in the U.K. (Owen, 1997; Goulbourne, 2002). However, I recognise that the Caribbean as a region and as ethnic category comprises diverse racial groups originating from European, Chinese, Indian, and Middle Eastern (i.e. Syrians) Diasporas.

to maintain established cultural, social and kinship links to their cultural and ethnic origins[2], whilst at the same time adapting to the social circumstances of being part of a black and minority ethnic community in the U.K.

Re-thinking mothering ideologies: intersections of race, class and gender

In the last fifty years a large body of research work has developed to address the complexity and interactional nature of mothering and what it means to be a mother in contemporary times. Much of the work has been dominated by particular concerns. So for example, debates have concentrated on biological versus social constructions of mothering; women's abortion and reproductive rights, the mother-child relationship, mothers and paid work, maternal rights and statutory provision, lone-motherhood, surrogacy 'new' reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and the genetic modification of embryos. Undeniably, these concerns have been of interest and relevance to black[3] mothers in the U.K. However, the intersection of race and gender (and class) mean that black mothers also have vastly different mothering issues and concerns that have often gone unrecognised in mothering discourses. For example, during the 1970s the main emphasis of feminist concern centred on women's reproductive rights, particularly women's right to control their fertility and limit reproduction. In this political landscape, white women politically mobilised to champion increased abortion rights for women (Richardson, 1993). Black women, however, articulated very different concerns over this same issue of reproductive rights. They highlighted that racist assumptions and attitudes to black family life resulted in black women being coerced into abortion and forced sterilisation and they politically mobilised against this issue and championed women's right to have children (Bryan et al., 1985). Similarly, in education a primary agenda for white mothers involves the matter of increased 'choice' in choosing children's schools (Davis, 1993). In contrast, black mothers have

2 I recognise that seeking to construct a collective Caribbean mothering identity in the U.K. that connects back, and is rooted in, the Caribbean could in itself be considered problematic. The (mis)representation of the Caribbean as a collective and unitary region conflates and disguises the fact that the Caribbean is a diverse and differentiated region with each territory possessing its own unique traditions and customs. Further to this, in each specific country divisions of class, caste, ethnicity and rural/urban living all influence household family patterns, and family relationships.

3 Throughout the study I continually interchange between describing the mothers as black and Caribbean. This deliberate act reflects the interactional nature of their Caribbean cultural ethnic origins and black racial politicised status in the U.K. in shaping their mothering identity. In addition by using the term 'black' I understand that many issues I highlight in the discussion will also be relevant and applicable to other black and minority ethnic mothers because they share the same structural racialised subordinate location.

focused their attention on rallying against the high rates of school exclusion and academic underachievement of their children (Goring, 2004). In recent years, for white mothers there has been increasing emphasis on achieving greater balance between work and home life (Reynolds et al., 2003; Edwards et al., 2004). Yet black mothers regard this as of secondary importance to their attempts to end racism and racial harassment in the work place (Harley, 1997; Dale and Holdsworth, 1998). Even the family, which white feminist critique as being oppressive for women, is identified by black feminists as supportive, and a 'safe haven', against racist society for black women (hooks, 1982).

These differing mothering issues and concerns experienced by black and white mothers clearly demonstrate that mothering cannot be understood in isolation from the intersecting factors of race, class and gender divisions. Hill Collins (1994) suggests that the narrow focus of analysis on white middle-class women in feminist theorising around mothering routinely minimizes the importance of these interlocking structures. This creates two problematic assumptions.

First, mothering is an individual act of caring and nurturing performed solely in the confines of family (typically nuclear) households. For black and minority ethnic mothers, mothering reflects both individual and community concerns involving paid work for family economic provision; strategies designed for the physical survival of children and community; and individual and collective identity.

Second, race and class divisions shape only the mothering context for minority ethnic and working-class women. In reality, race and class shape all women's mothering contexts and relationships irrespective of ethnic and racial categories but for white middle-class mothers their racial and class location is usually invisible in the debates. Exploring the mothering relationships of black and white women, Glenn (1994) suggests, '*race and class hierarchy creates interdependence as well as difference between white middle-class and working-class ethnic mothers*' (Glenn, 1994: 7). One example of this interdependent relationship is that historically white middle-class mothers, on account of their race and class privilege, regard mothering and child care services as commodities that are purchased from working-class and minority ethnic women, who are often mothers themselves. These women are then forced into finding other relatives to care for their own children while they are employed in providing child care and mothering services for the privileged mothers (Dill, 1988). Research also indicates that other social, cultural and economic developments reinforce the racial and class contexts of mothering. In the U.K., for example, high and

middle-income women have largely benefited from advances in reproductive technology such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF). Legislation and the medical profession control access to this treatment. White working-class and minority ethnic women have less opportunity to access this reproductive technology because of the high financial costs involved and the limited availability of free or financially affordable treatment offered under the National Health Service (Richardson, 1993). The issue of surrogacy, where an embryo is translated into another woman's womb, and is also achieved through medical advancements in IVF, further expands the possibilities for exploiting poor women's—especially black and 'third world' women—lack of economic options, because these women may be encouraged to sell their bodies for reproductive purposes (Glen, 1994). The racial and class contexts of mothering is also demonstrated by the high infant mortality rates that continue to disproportionately affect poor, working-class, black and minority ethnic groups (Duncan and Brookes-Gunn, 1997; Taylor et al., 1997). In another direction, the rapid rise of HIV/AIDS in developing countries such as Africa and the Caribbean and amongst poor and black people in advanced countries has expanded the number of young children who are orphaned or who provide mothering care themselves for their sick parents and siblings (Ellis, 2003). The number of adults that are dependent on mothering care in western societies has also greatly expanded because of an increasing elderly population. Such care, traditionally provided within family units and usually by a female relative, is either being turned over to nursing homes or family members are buying in carers to perform tasks in their relatives' homes. Here again in western societies people who tend to purchase care provision services are the white middle classes and the majority of carers are migrant women from the developing countries such as the Caribbean, Africa, the Philippines and Eastern Europe states (Gordon et al., 1996; Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

Researching Caribbean mothers in the U.K.

The analysis of Caribbean mothering in the U.K. commences from the post World War II period (late 1940s) and continues to present day[4]. This post war period marks the beginning of Caribbean mothering in the U.K. because it was during this era that Caribbean women arrived *en masse* to work in health,

4 Whilst this study does not go beyond the post war years it is important to note that black communities were established in the U.K. prior to this period, and as early as the 1900s. These were mainly in the old sea-port and dock areas of Bristol, Cardiff and Liverpool, where Caribbean men worked as seamen. However, it was almost exclusively men who migrated from the Caribbean and they married and raised families with the white indigenous women of these areas (James and Harris, 1993).

public utilities and the manufacturing/industrial sectors in large industrial metropolitan areas and in response to labour shortages in key industries (Dodgson, 1984). The young demographic profile of these migrant women meant that a large proportion of them were already mothers with young children when they migrated to the U.K. or they became mothers in a few years of their arrival here.

The research documents the mothering experiences of forty Caribbean mothers. During 1996 to 1997, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with twenty-five mothers living in four areas of London. These interviews were part of my doctoral thesis investigating African-Caribbean mothers in the U.K. (see Reynolds, 1999). In 1999 I carried out a further number of in-depth interviews with fifteen Caribbean mothers living in the geographical areas of London, Manchester, Birmingham, Coventry, and Huddersfield. These interviews were part of a small-scale study investigating Caribbean women's role in black community voluntary organisations (see Goulbourne and Reynolds, forthcoming; Reynolds, 2003b). The main advantage of a relatively small sample size of forty mothers is that it allows for an in-depth focus on the lives and experiences of these women. This is particularly important in under researched area of Caribbean mothering in the U.K. The age groups of the mothers range between 19 to 81 years-old. This wide age range facilitates the analysis of inter-generational similarities and differences. Four of the mothers in the study are third generation mothers, between the ages of 19 to 24 years-old; twenty-one mothers are second generation mothers, 25 to 40 years-old; eleven mothers are either second or first generation mothers, 41 to 60 years-old, and five mothers are first generation, 61 plus years-old and retired. These retired mothers provide a retrospective account of the mothering and the particular issues and concerns that they faced as first generation mothers raising black children from the 1950s through to the 1970s. The retired mothers' retrospective accounts are also vital in highlighting the generational shifts in child care and employment patterns that have occurred for black mothers over the years. In addition, these retired mothers assist with the care or of their grandchildren and great grandchildren today and so they continue to do mothering work.

In terms of the mothers' marital status, sixteen mothers are married (including mothers who have re-married) and twenty-four mothers self-define themselves as lone-mothers. There is a lot of variation in their understanding and definition of lone-mothering and this category comprises mothers who state that they are single-never married, divorced, widowed and living with their partners in conjugal

or 'visiting' relationships. (See appendix 1 for summary of the mothers who participated in the study). This relatively uneven distribution of mothers according to age category and marital status is a consequence of the 'snowballing' sample method I used to access the mothers for interview in a number of different sites. These included my own personal friends and contacts; black churches; colleges and universities; Caribbean community groups and black professional organisations. Following on from my interview with each mother they would refer me to one or two other mothers in their personal networks (primarily family and kinship members, friends and work colleagues) that I could approach for interview. The very randomness of this snowballing process meant that it was impossible for me to secure an equal number of mothers in each age category. The interviews took place in varied locations including their homes, place of work and voluntary community venues. Several interviews took place in the presence of children. All the mothers had children with black partners (primarily of Caribbean heritage) despite the high prevalence of mixed relationships between black and white partners in the U.K.[5] Consequently, discussions concerning 'mixed relationships' and its implications for black mothering and family life that have been highlighted elsewhere (for example, Tizard and Phoenix, 1993) are not fully explored in this study.

The interviews were generally lengthy and time-consuming, lasting approximately three hours. During the interviews I was especially concerned with thinking reflexively about how my status, a Caribbean woman and not a mother, would influence my interviews with the mothers. This form of reflexive thinking fits in with black feminist researchers' concerns with understanding the intersections of race, class and gender in the research process (Bhopal, 1997; Sudbury, 1998). My own experience as a Caribbean female researcher interviewing other Caribbean women, in essence my 'insider/outsider' research status, meant that I was attentive to how gender, race and class status impacts on the research process and interactions with the mothers. From the very onset when I was establishing my research sample I initially assumed that it would be easy for me to find other Caribbean women willing to participate in the study on the basis of our shared gender, ethnic and cultural background. However, my initial request for interviews were met with an ambivalent response by the mothers and the particular age of the woman was a primary factor in this. The (relationally) younger black mothers (those who I term in the study as 'second' and 'third' generation mothers, born and raised in the U.K. during the 1960s

5 I am unclear about the reasons for only securing mothers in black partnerships in my study but it is clear that the snowballing method where the mothers directed me towards other mothers in their personal networks is a primary factor in the sample generated.

onwards) openly welcomed my request to participate in the research. In contrast a substantial proportion of older mothers (age 50 plus, 'first' generation mothers who were born in the Caribbean and migrated to the U.K. as adult women or young girls) generally regarded my request with great unease, suspicion and mistrust. To overcome this reluctance by some of the first generation mothers I had to rely upon black community workers and senior members of the black church as my first points of entry. These women were well liked, trusted and respected in the black community. The mere fact that I was also a Caribbean woman counted for little.

Some of these first generation black mothers' responses towards me offer confirmation of Angela McRobbie's (1982) view that 'no research can be understood in a vacuum' and consequently, these women's responses must be considered in a wider social context. In the U.K., for example, black women have historically occupied a problematic position in social research. With some notable exceptions, and primarily developed through black feminist theory (for example Bryan et al., 1985; Mama, 1993; Mirza, 1992 and 1997; Reynolds, 1999; and Sudbury, 1998 amongst others) there has been a tendency in social research in the U.K. to either identify black women as marginal to the debate or as occupying a pathological and problematic position in society. This suspicion of me from some of the mothers also demonstrates that they recognised that, despite my status as academic researcher, my structural location as a black woman ensured that I was subject to similar structural constraints and issues of inequality and discrimination as themselves in academia. As a consequence the mothers understood that my role as interviewer did not automatically translate into me having overall control of the data and the way in which the raw data is analysed and reported because like other black women I am subject to similar patterns of control and exploitation. At the start of each interview I was frequently asked who was I doing the research for? Was anyone else involved in the project? Would I be involved in the finally writing up of the study? Underpinning these questions was an implicit assumption and concern by the mothers that my role as researcher would be strictly limited to conducting the interview; and that another more powerful person (i.e. a white male academic) would have the responsibility for analysing and reporting the data.

A more complex discussion of power relations demonstrates that social research is inextricably linked to wider race, class and gender divisions in society. Diane Wolf (1996) argues that social research is generally conducted by individuals and groups in society who posses a higher social status than the

individuals and groups who they are researching. So for example, (and using crude and simplistic binaries), it is common for researchers from a middle-class background to investigate the experiences of working-class groups.

Cultural historical factors also go some way towards explaining some black women's reluctance to participate in research. bell hooks (1989) contends that historically black women have been socialised to keep personal thoughts to themselves and if they must be discussed, this should occur in the private confines of the home with family and close friends. Black women's 'silences' have historically acted as a site of resistance in societies that seek to denigrate them. For example, during the slavery period black women's 'silences' in the public domain led to personal survival and the opportunity to sustain various aspects of their cultural heritage (Chamberlain, 1995).

Black feminist researchers have had to develop a reflexive understanding of their own racialised and gendered location in society and the way that this may inform power relations in the research process. Kum Kum Bhavnani's discussion (1993), concerning her interviews with a group of adolescents about their schooling is particularly useful in demonstrating the impact of societal structural divisions on shifting power relations between the researcher and research subject during the research process. Bhavnani comments: '*my age, and my assumed class affiliation may have been taken as sources of potential domination. However, my racialised and gender ascription suggested the opposite. That is, in this instance, the interviewees and myself were inscribed in multi-faceted power relations which had structural dominance and structural subordination in play on both sides*' (1993: 101). As the above quotation indicates, Bhavnani's 'Asian-ness' and 'female-ness', two fundamental aspects of her personal identity, inscribed her a structurally subordinate status in relation to the white boys whose 'whiteness' and 'maleness' placed them in a structurally dominant location. This was demonstrated in the interviews where she allowed them to dictate and control the style and pace of questioning at this localised and personalised level of research. However, her shared racial background and age with the Asian girls meant that she could utilise her higher social class status to assume control in the interviews with schoolgirls.

In this study, class and generation divisions influenced the interview process in various ways. First, the mother's own individual assessment of social class difference created a shifting power dynamic between us. During the interviews I alternated between being perceived by these women as either working-class or middle-class and this affected their response to me. For example, the middle-class

status I was given by some of the mothers who defined themselves as working-class created the belief that I had access to certain information and resources that they, as working-class women, would be restricted from accessing. Some of the working-class mothers, in particular those who had low educational attainment, would ask my opinion about the social and educational aspects of higher education. In addition they would ask my advice on career and housing matters. They also requested my help in obtaining information for them from officials because they felt that my requests would have a more positive outcome. Second, with regards to generation divisions, often I felt intimidated when interviewing some of the older mothers because of the wide age difference and the fact that these mothers possess a wealth of experience. My own cultural background also meant that I was raised to respect my elders and not question them on matters that would prove to be embarrassing or intrusive for fear of appearing disrespectful. As a consequence I felt reluctant in posing questions to these mothers that I had no problems asking the younger black women, such as the discussion areas that centred on constructions of black female sexuality and sexual identity. In this instance, I felt once again that power and authority rested with the research participants, contradicting the traditional viewpoint of the 'powerful researcher.' This interaction between race, class and gender suggests that power in social research is not a fixed and unitary construct, exercised by the researcher over the research subject. Instead power is multi-faceted, relational and interactional and is constantly shifting being re-negotiated itself between the researcher and the research participant according to differing contexts. Consequently, any understanding of Caribbean women's experiences in social research, either as a researcher or a research participant, needs to be viewed in the context of their wider structural location in the U.K. This research relationship is a salient feature of my analysis of Caribbean mothering in the U.K.

Chapter outline

This book is concerned with exploring Caribbean mothers' experience, identity and practices. This chapter introduced the subject of study, Caribbean mothers, and outlined the rationale and importance of the research. But before we can begin to understand the experiences of these mothers it is important to clarify the feminist approach that shapes this study. Chapter 2 provides a detail analysis of black feminism and the particular ways this feminist approach has developed a black feminist standpoint theory to critique westernised mothering discourses. Despite the limitations of black feminist standpoint theory, which I highlight in

this chapter, this study of Caribbean mothering derives from, and is motivated by, this feminist approach because of its desire to place black women's experiences at the centre of analysis. Commonalities exist between the Caribbean mothers with regards to a shared racial and cultural background. An important aspect of the study is to construct and demonstrate a collective mothering identity, and the factors that shape this. However, in doing so, it is equally important to guard against representing these mothers as an essentialised and homogenous construct. Chapter 3 achieves that by identifying those discourses of difference which underpin the mothers' narratives. The chapter draws on the mothers' accounts in the study to reveal that they conceptualise and understand difference on a number of distinct but intersecting levels, including racial difference, social class divisions and difference informed by transitory individual subjectivities and life-cycle.

Chapter 4 outlines how the mothers utilise these discourses of difference in their mothering to construct a collective mothering identity. This identity relies upon cultural traditions and cultural memory and it is shaped by factors of racism, and their racial 'other' and minority ethnic status in the U.K.

Chapter 5 demonstrates that an important part of Caribbean mothers collective identity and mothering work involves the development of child rearing strategies to resist and respond to their marginalised and racialised location. The strategies the mothers utilise as modes of resistance include: the mental and emotional preparation of their children to confront and challenge racism in their everyday lives; the surveillance of their children's education; constructions of cultural belonging through the celebration of Caribbean cultural traditions; and the policing and monitoring of children in public spaces.

Chapter 6 demonstrates that for Caribbean mothers another important facet of their collective mothering identity is paid work. Economic provision for their children through paid work, in addition to mothering and child rearing work in the home, is intrinsic to Caribbean mothering and a central feature of the Caribbean mothers experiences in the U.K. Both structural economic and cultural explanations are used as evidence of this long standing historical experience.

Chapter 7 introduces the notion of 'community mothering' to establish that Caribbean mothering also encompasses maternal responsibility and mothering work for family, kinship, community and members. In the U.K., the increasing number of welfare based Caribbean community organisations that provide care and support for children and other vulnerable adults (elderly, mentally ill

and disabled) that are established, headed up, and dominated by Caribbean mothers, is testimony of a mothering identity defined by individual/family and collective/community concerns.

Chapter 8 looks at the mothers' views concerning male participation and involvement in family life and ways that their 'absent presence' and 'present absence' actively informs their mothering. Much of the literature concerning women's role and status in family life has overlooked the participation and involvement of Caribbean men. There is limited analysis to challenge the common characterisation of Caribbean men as absent, irresponsible, feckless and marginal in family relationships. From a wider structuralist perspective there is limited understanding of how patriarchal relations govern family relationships between Caribbean men and women and household arrangements.

The conclusion, chapter 9, brings together the main themes and issues raised throughout the book to understand its policy relevance in U.K. society today. It examines how the material in previous chapters combines to form a Caribbean mothering identity based on collective and diverse experiences, practice and values.