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April-Louise Pennant

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Who's checkin' for Black girls and women in the "pandemic within a pandemic"? COVID-19, Black Lives Matter and educational implications

April-Louise Pennant

Chair for Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation (CriSHET), Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

ABSTRACT

While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt widely, for Black communities – particularly in the US and Britain – it was felt more severely. This was compounded by another deadly pandemic that was devastating Black communities and evidenced by the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of George Floyd. Parallels can be drawn between the deadly COVID-19 virus and the anti-Black systemic racism fuelling the existence of the Black Lives Matter movement – which both disproportionately kill Black people. Therefore, many within these communities are living in a "pandemic within a pandemic". Still, the focus on Black boys and men continued the parallels between both pandemics, failing to include the plight of Black girls and women who are also enduring the same impact as their Black male counterparts. This paper draws upon previous doctoral research about the educational journeys and experiences of Black British women graduates in light of the educational implications of the "pandemic within a pandemic" for this group. Framed by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (BTP) within the context of Black Feminist Epistemology (BFE), it highlights that Black women and girls have to bear an unfair "burden of care" not only for themselves but for others too. Lastly, it will argue that now more than ever, due to the "pandemic within a pandemic", as a society we all need to be checkin' for Black girls and women as they have been silently suffering, navigating and overcoming for far too long.

Introduction

The "pandemic within a pandemic": COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter (BLM)

The emergence of COVID-19, which officially became a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (World Health Organisation, 2020a), exacerbated the existing inequalities that plague society. Yet, while the impact of COVID-19 was felt widely, Black[1] communities – particularly in the US and Britain (APM Research Lab, 2020; Office for National Statistics, 2020a) – felt it more severely and in ways that called into question their historical,

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CONTACT April-Louise Pennant ✉ soulz_april@hotmail.co.uk 🏫 School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue Cardiff, CF10 3WT

differential, and daily treatment, experiences, and struggles in predominantly white societies (Busey & Coleman-King, 2020; Fanon, 1952; Michael, 2017). Despite the COVID-19 responses of many governments, which included implementing "large scale physical distancing measures and movement restrictions, often referred to as 'lockdowns'"(World Health Organisation, 2020b), as a result of the disproportionate and lower socio-economic status of Black communities in Britain and the US, many were unable to benefit from these measures due to working in essential jobs (Office for National Statistics, 2020b; Schermerhorn, 2020; The Health Foundation, 2020), jobs that also put them at higher risk of being exposed to and contracting the virus (Kerrissey et al., 2020; UNISON, 2020a). Specifically, within Britain, this was further compounded by a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) to support these workers as they carried out their vital duties (British Medical Association, 2021; Burford et al., 2020; Edwards, 2021; Royal College of Nursing, 2020; UNISON, 2020a); as well as racist hospital care (BBC, 2020a; Kale, 2021) and slow, inadequate government responses to addressing the inordinate number of Black deaths (The Ubele Initiative, 2021).[2] Many of these communities also live in highly deprived areas compared with their white counterparts (Office for National Statistics, 2020c; Ogbonna, 2020; Public Health England, 2020). These conditions evidence how race and class inextricably converge to further impact upon Black people's lived experiences (Snoussi & Mompelat, 2019; Spivak et al., 2011).

Moreover, due to the brutal and public display of state-sanctioned violence against George Floyd in the American city of Minneapolis on 25 May 2020, where a police officer was filmed by onlookers murdering Floyd, the lack of justice that ensued shocked and rocked the world, catapulting the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. This emphasised that COVID-19 was not the only deadly pandemic that was devastating Black communities. While the Black Lives Matter movement originated in the US, its global prominence is exemplified by the "rallying cry" that "the UK is not innocent" (Joseph-Salisbury et al., 2021, p. 22), as the issues raised by the movement are prevalent and actively experienced by Black diasporic communities in Britain, the wider UK and the world.

In many ways, parallels can be drawn between the deadly COVID-19 virus and the issues highlighted by Black Lives Matter, which both showcase anti-Black systemic racism and the interconnected domain of class, which both result in the disproportionality of Black mortality. Therefore, it is apparent that for many members of Black communities, they are currently living in a "pandemic within a pandemic" (Laurencin & Walker, 2020; Stolberg, 2020).

#SayHerName: the differential impact on Black girls and women

The focus of the impact on Black boys and men continues the parallels between both the COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter pandemics, which fail to include the plight of Black girls and women who are also enduring the same impact as their Black male counterparts. Yet, as evidenced from much of the media commentary of COVID-19, when discussing the high rate of Black deaths, it is firmly premised on the centring of Black male experiences (Boyd, 2020; Johnson & Martin, 2020; McIntyre, 2020). This is surprising when, for instance, the Office for National Statistics (2020a) reported that "when taking into account age in the analysis, Black males are 4.2 times more likely to die from a COVID-19-related death

and Black females are **4.3 times** more likely than White ethnicity males and females" [emphasis added]. Likewise, studies have begun to emerge about the strain of COVID-19 on Black women, both in the US and Britain, which includes the deteriorating mental health of these women (Benbow, 2020; The Prince's Responsible Business Network, 2020; Walton et al., 2021); their physical health (Chandler et al., 2021); and their heightened home and work responsibilities (Burton & Fontana, 2020; Mckinsey & Company, 2020). As Chandler et al. (2021, p. 81) highlight, "not only are Black women more likely to experience consequential impacts from COVID-19; they are also less likely to recover from the impacts of this disease". This is exemplified within Britain in the case of a Black woman Transport for London worker, Belly Mujinga, who contracted the virus, from which she later died. As she had underlying health issues, it is argued that her employers had a duty of care to provide her with resources to protect her as she worked (Kale, 2020); indeed, Belly was spat upon by a commuter who claimed to have the virus- though this was later disproved (Pegg & Thomas, 2020; The Crown Prosecution Service, 2020). Additionally, her case was only brought to wider public attention when protests erupted, and her family are still seeking justice for her death (Campbell, 2021).

According to research conducted by the Fawcett Society et al. (2020) not only are Black African and Black Caribbean people in Britain "over-represented in key workers jobs, especially front-line health and social care roles, compared to white people … women are over-represented in key worker roles compared to men". This is supported by UNISON (2020b) who also investigated the disproportionate rates of frontline workers in health and social care jobs from Black and women groups. As a consequence, Black women and their families are extremely vulnerable within the pandemic, as the case of 28-year-old Mary Agyapong – a pregnant nurse who died of COVID-19 as she "felt pressured to work" – exemplifies (BBC, 2021). Additionally, the Women's resource centre (2020) emphasised several concerns and provided government recommendations in their report to support organisations led by Black and minority ethnic women in Britain. They argue for additional support as such organisations are unlikely to survive the COVID-19 pandemic "particularly as they were in a weakened position at the outset" (Women's resource centre, 2020, p. 1). Black women in the US also experience a similar level of COVID-19 vulnerability to those in Britain. Gould and Wilson (2020) cite a combination of racism and economic inequality as "two of the most lethal preexisting conditions" that Black workers, specifically Black women workers, already endure in which COVID-19 has and will continue to exacerbate. They also explain that Black women will inevitably be more affected during the pandemic due to realities such as existing race and gender pay gaps (p. 6); having higher rates of one-earner households (p. 7) and higher unemployment rates along with greater job losses at the start of the pandemic in 2020 "between February and April" (p. 3). In this line of research, McKinsey & Company (2020, p. 28) compiled a report about women in the workplace, specifically within corporate settings, writing that, "compared with their colleagues of other races and ethnicities, Black women have always had distinct, and by large and worse, experiences at work". The report goes on to acknowledge that Black women have and will continue to face hardship as they are most likely to experience the death of loved ones due to the pandemic and/or racial violence and that they are more likely to consider leaving the workforce due to health and safety concerns (p. 29). Lastly, when their roles as mothers are considered, the report states that they are "shouldering heavier burdens than white mothers"

(McKinsey & Company, 2020, p. 19) leading to extreme exhaustion. What seems to be clear from these studies in both the US and Britain is the differential impact of COVID-19 on Black women.

Moreover, although the global vaccination programme is viewed as the main way to combat COVID-19, there are issues, such as fears among young women. These fears are warranted as, according to Brillo et al. (2021, p. 1), "pregnant women were excluded from the initial phase 3 clinical trials of COVID-19 vaccines resulting in limited data on their efficacy and safety during pregnancy and postpartum." Additionally, there is "COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy" (Dhama et al., 2021) particularly amongst Black communities. Woko et al. (2021) outline some of the reasons for the low vaccination take-up by Black Americans, citing the influences of behaviours, beliefs and trust in the information circulated by mainstream and social media, President Trump, and public health officials and agencies. A similar "vaccination hesitancy" exists within Britain, where it was reported that it "was highest in Black or Black British groups, with 72% stating they were unlikely/very unlikely to be vaccinated" (Robertson et al., 2021, p. 43). This hesitancy among both young women and Black people can converge and heighten when Black women are considered. However, such hesitancy should be viewed against the historical and present-day backdrop of medical racism, namely in terms of childbirth outcomes (MBRACE-UK, 2020; Taylor, 2020), reproductive rights (Jones, 2013; Shreffler et al., 2015) and experimentation (Prather et al., 2018; Skloot, 2010).

Furthermore, the erasure of Black girls and women within the Black Lives Matter movement is another point of contention (Cooper, 2020; Jacobs, 2017; the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) and Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies (CISPS), 2014). This contrasts with the sustained anger and action after the murder of George Floyd (and many other murdered, unarmed Black men and boys) when, for the murder of Breonna Taylor (and countless other unarmed Black girl and women victims), "the rage lasted a few days and then quelled to a mere whisper" (Egbuonu, 2020) – although it did eventually pick up momentum. This erasure prompted Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw to create the #SayHerName campaign to address the imbalance and invisibility of Black girl and women victims of state-sanctioned violence. Again, the erasure of Black girls and women within this movement is surprising when the Black Lives Matter movement was co-created by three Black women – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, as well as the fact that "Black queer, feminist, and intersectional thought is not a mere thread in BLM; it is *the central* thread of #BlackLivesMatter and its intellectual lineage" (Sewell, 2018, p. 1444, emphasis in original).

On the other hand, it must be noted that the heightened visibility of Black male experiences are not novel occurrences, as previously highlighted by Crenshaw's (1989, 1991, p. 1241) intellectual contribution of "intersectionality", which articulates how "race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political and representational aspects of violence against women of colour". This supports what Collins (2009) defines as the "matrix of domination" which she uses to explain "the overall social organisation within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained". More recently, Bailey's (2018, p. 762) contribution of the concept of "misogynoir" emphasises "the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience". These scholarly offerings by Crenshaw, Collins and Bailey demonstrate the difficult systems and conditions that Black girls and women

operate within. For this reason, the erasure of Black girls and women within the "pandemic within a pandemic" can be understood by

> the separate narrative constructions of race, gender and class: in a racial discourse, where the subject is male; in a gendered discourse, where the subject is white; and a class discourse, where race has no place. It is because of these ideological blind spots that black women occupy a most critical place- a location whose very nature resists telling. (Mirza, 1997, p. 4)

Post-pandemic educational implications: lockdown and re-emerging educational barriers

Against the backdrop of the "pandemic within a pandemic" that has changed the way societies operate around the world, it is inevitable that the effects of this will impact young people and transpire into the education system (Rinfrette, 2021). In Britain, these effects are illustrated by incidents such as the controversial exam testing algorithms in England which were provided by Ofqual (2020) and calculated student grades (Smith, 2020); and the move to online learning (Watermeyer et al., 2020) which in time will solidify established educational barriers (Major et al., 2020).

As Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) write, the online move for education systems globally created both opportunities such as flexibility and interactivity, as well as challenges like differential access to technology and interruption caused by being confined to the home. Moreover, the usual measures of educational "success" obtained via the completion of assessments and exams were disrupted and replaced with alternative methods. In England, due to the closure of schools, for GCSE and A-Level results, teachers provided estimated grades and a ranking of students in relation to other similarly graded students. Along with the teachers' self-assessment, which was fed into an algorithm, the whole school's performance over the last three years was also considered to produce a final student grade (BBC, 2020b). Based on this method, it was unsurprising that it led to "disadvantaged students [being] disproportionately affected by the downgrading of 'A' Level results," (Bright, 2020), and the uproar of public outrage leading to the government's rethinking of the continued use of algorithms (Ferguson & Savage, 2020; Malik, 2020; Quinn, 2020). The reliance on teacher predictions and algorithms facilitates the re-emergence of educational barriers such as teacher bias that has historically and negatively disproportionately impacted upon Black students (Coard, 1971; Crozier, 2005; Fuller, 1980; Mirza, 1992, 2006a, 2006b; Stone, 1981). Moreover, it has been reported that "in only 39.1% of cases predicted grades for Black students are accurate" (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2011, p. 8). The long-term effects of grade predictions and outcomes due to COVID-19 for Black students are unknown but are already beginning to have a profound impact (Akel, 2020; Cowan, 2020).

Wellbeing and mental health have also been a major concern for a while, particularly for students (Department for Education, 2017; Public Health England, 2014; Student Minds and Mind, 2018). However, as previously stated, Black communities have been enduring a "pandemic within a pandemic" where they have disproportionately been subjected to witnessing their loved ones and members of their communities dying (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020; Glass, 2020). Additionally, they have also been witnessing people that look like them being brutalised and brandished across every media platform which will inevitably affect their wellbeing, mental health and learning (Ladson-Billings,

2021). While Black communities continue to find ways to resist and support themselves through collective and public pain and trauma (Haynes et al., 2019; Outley et al., 2021), moving forward, there is a need to address and provide tailored and additional mental health support to Black students within educational institutions (Black Students Talk, 2021; Chambers, 2011; University of Bath Student Services, 2021). Little research exists on understanding how the "pandemic within the pandemic" will specifically impact the educational journeys and experiences of Black girls and women.

This paper will revisit previous doctoral research about Black British women graduates to explore the educational implications of the "pandemic within the pandemic" for this group.

Conceptual framework

As Black women's identities are located at the intersections of gender and race, along with the additional focus on class, ethnicity and cultural background, an intersectional approach was chosen (Berger & Guidroz, 2010; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Windsong, 2018). This approach facilitated the application of a unique combination of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (BTP) and Critical Race Theory (CRT). BTP was employed to provide a critical understanding of the role of whiteness and class divisions within it, assisting in highlighting the ways in which the education system is tailored by and for white, middle class students who possess the accepted habitus (e.g. behaviour, speech, style – ways of "feeling and thinking" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 70)) and capitals (e.g. cultural, social and symbolic[3]) which are utilised as additional resources to enable them (and their families) to navigate with ease (Bourdieu, 1984; Cui, 2017; Rampersad, 2014; Rollock, 2014; Wallace, 2018); Critical Race Theory (CRT) facilitated highlighting the prominence of the role of race and racism in mainstream society and its institutions (Harris, 2016; Solórzano & Delgado, 2001; Taylor, 2009). BTP and CRT were then utilised within the context of Black Feminist epistemology (BFE) to centre the lived experiences of Black women through the production of their specialised, experiential knowledge (Collins, 1986; Collins, 2000; Reynolds, 2002). Altogether, this combination articulated the holistic identities of participants, foregrounding the interconnected domains of race, ethnicity, culture, gender and class. The use of BTP alongside CRT as a theoretical framework assisted in providing a sociological perspective when interpreting the data and articulating specific elements of the Black British women graduates' identities, and how these operated within the structures of the (white) education system. This framework was then utilised in terms of how it operated according to the experiential knowledge of Black British women graduates as promoted by BFE.

Literature review

Anti-Black racism and the education system

The systemic anti-Black racism that underpins both the COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter pandemics also exudes into British and US education systems which are a microcosm of each society. In the emerging field of "BlackCrit", an offshoot of CRT, which pays close attention to the operation of anti-Black racism and the "specificity of the Black"

(Wynter, 1989), scholars (Dumas (2016; Dumas & ross, 2016; Warren & Coles, 2020) assert how Black experiences are unique within the field of education, particularly as Black people were only permitted to be formally educated after hundreds of years of exclusion, which formed the basis of the existing inequity of education systems in Britain and the US. Givens (2016, p. 1288) further clarifies that they entered a system in which "members of the African Diaspora could be inundated with ideology that would stunt their political, economic, and social progress; thus, supporting the goals of white supremacy". These white supremacist ideologies are present within the structure of the education system through the accessibility and quality of the educational institutions that Black children can attend (Diette, 2012); Griffin & Allen, 2006; Weekes-Bernard, 2007); the education policies that uphold and maintain the system (Gillborn, 2005; Gulson, 2006; Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018); the curriculum (Arday, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Peters, 2015); the positioning and treatment of Black students within it (Hamilton, 2018; Kohli & Solózano, 2012; Rollock, 2007a; Youdell, 2003); and the disproportionate rates at which they are still being excluded (Department for Education, 2021a). For Dumas (2014, p. 21), schooling can be viewed as a site of Black suffering precisely because:

> black education is about securing humanity [and] black suffering in schools signifies the loss or cultural devaluation of that humanity, and the loss of the material resources that allow black subjects to be regarded (and educated) as human beings.

The effects of the anti-Black racism, which is prevalent within the education system, are highlighted by the attainment and outcomes of young Black British students at key stages of their educational trajectories (AdvanceHE, 2020; Department for Education, 2021b; Wright, 2013). However, Black communities have continuously resisted and challenged the education system to ensure better educational experiences, journeys and outcomes for themselves and their children. Such examples include the Black supplementary school movement (Andrews, 2016; Gerrard, 2011, 2013; Mirza & Reay, 2000) and dedicated strategising and parental support (Pennant, 2020a; Rollock et al., 2015; Vincent et al., 2012).

Navigating in silence and caring for self: the invisibility of Black girls and women in educational debates

When attention is focused upon Black students within British and US education systems, Black girls and women are often ignored (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Mirza, 1986; Ricks, 2014; Showumni, 2017). Within a British context, this disregard can be attributed to Black girls and women being "viewed in direct relation to the sets of ongoing bothered beliefs and contentious concerns that exist for black boys" (Rollock, 2007b, p. 201), which means that they are not seen as warranting independent interest or support. The homogenising of Black girls' and womens' experiences with how Black boys and men are viewed fails to acknowledge or understand the ways in which their "intersecting dimensions of race, class and gender can result in privileges or penalties depending on their positioning" (Wright, 2013, p. 90), and in ways that differ from Black boys' educational experiences and journeys. For example, while it is true that Black boys and men tend to underperform at key stages and at the end of their university experiences, in these same statistics it is evident that Black girls and

women are not performing much better (AdvanceHE, 2020; Department for Education, 2021b). Therefore, Black girls' and women's educational journeys and experiences warrant a similar level of interest, understanding and support that is often given to Black boys and men (Nunn, 2018; Nyachae, 2016; Pennant, 2020a; 2020b).

However, Black girls and women illustrate their agency in US and British contexts through how they have cared for and supported themselves to navigate the education system to gain elusive educational "success" (Bryan et al., 1985; Chambers, 2011; Cook & Williams, 2015; Kelly, 2018; Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Mirza, 1992). Yet, while the support systems that Black girls and women create are notable, the onus of navigating the education system should not fall solely on their shoulders as it can create additional pressures which can lead to mental health implications (Carter & Rossi, 2019; McPherson, 2020; Spates et al., 2020). Rather, the responsibility should be on educational institutions and policy makers to create an anti-racist, intersectional and socially just education system for all learners (and staff) to thrive (Bhopal, 2020; Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Mirza, 2018; Reay, 2012).

The next section of this paper will revisit doctoral findings about the experiences and journeys of Black British women graduates considering the "pandemic within a pandemic".

Methodology

To explore the educational trajectories and experiences of Black British women graduates, the overarching question that framed the research was:

- What are the educational journeys and experiences of Black British women graduates?

More specifically, the research sought to explore the characteristics, key decisions, choices, the influence of identities, and the role of family and extended networks within educational experiences and journeys.

Sample

For the purposes of exploring Black women's educational journeys and experiences, 25 Black British women were selected by way of snowball and purposive sampling. The participants self-defined as Black, more specifically within "African Diasporic Blackness" (Andrews, 2016, p. 2063), they all had Black British African or Caribbean heritage and they were all born and/or residing in England. Every participant had journeyed through the English education system,[4] from primary school until university, and they had all graduated from undergraduate courses in English universities. Initially, and in line with The Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) (2016) survey, the aim of the study was to include Black British women who had graduated within six months to one year. However, this limited the scope of potential participants significantly and therefore, this period was extended to include Black British women who had graduated between 2014 and 2017. This time period meant that participants were still relatively new graduates and therefore would have strong recollections of their educational journeys and experiences. Additionally, some participants could also provide deeper reflections

related to being in the labour market. Overall, the sample was comprised of a diverse group of Black women graduates from a range of backgrounds with a variety of educational experiences and journeys.

Methods

Qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were held in late 2017 in the Southeast and Midlands of England, lasting approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes each. Interviews were shaped by an interview guide where the participants shared their insights in answer to open-ended questions based upon four main areas of their personal histories; their educational experiences and journeys within primary and secondary schooling, college/sixth form and university; the key influences within their experiences and journeys and reflections on the role of their identities. One interviewer conducted face-to-face, one-to-one interviews in mutually agreed, neutral and private locations with each participant.

Participants were given the opportunity to adopt their own cultural capital in ways they deemed appropriate (Wallace, 2017; Yosso, 2005) and some engaged in code-switching to express their experiences within interviews (Boulton, 2016; Davis, 2018). All interviews were audio-recorded and the data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using NVivo – a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis tool. The data were coded and thematic analysis was utilised, led by the data to identify "key topics and patterns, regularities and contrasts, in the material in order to create interpretive meaning" (Edwards & Weller, 2012, p. 204), as well as to provide answers to the research question. Rigour of the data was ensured by peer and supervisory debriefings in which transcripts, emerging and final themes were reviewed and assessed.

Ethics

Ethical considerations were made and maintained in line with the British Educational Research guidelines (BERA, 2011; 2018) and the host institution in which ethical approval was gained. This included obtaining informed written consent; storing the data on a password-protected, secured hard drive; informing participants about their right to withdraw; using pseudonyms to replace participant names and changing or omitting any identifying information, such as educational institution names to ensure confidentiality.

Revisiting the research results in light of the "pandemic within a pandemic"

Although the research was conducted in 2017, the lack of interest and appropriate support for Black British women, as illustrated by the "pandemic within a pandemic", was evident within the research about their experiences and journeys within the education system. Within the next section, the experiential knowledge of three of the 25 participants – Takara, Joy and Ebony – will be used as references. See Table 1 for more information about them.

Table 1. Participant information table.

Pseudonym	Ethnicity/cultural background[a]	Type of educational institution attended[b]	Type of university attended[c]
Takara	African Caribbean	*Primary school:* Multicultural, State *Secondary school:* Multicultural, State *Post-16 education:* Multicultural, State, sixth form college	Pre-1992 university
Joy	British Ghanaian	*Primary school:* Predominantly White, State *Secondary school:* Predominantly White, Grammar *Post-16 education*: remained in secondary school for sixth form provision	Elite university
Ebony	British with Jamaican and Guyanese heritage	*Primary school:* Multicultural, State *Secondary school*: Predominantly White, Private *Post-16 education:* Multicultural State, sixth form college	Elite university

[a]Participants self-defined their ethnic/cultural backgrounds.
[b]Type of educational institution: (i) Multicultural institutions are defined as having higher proportions of pupils and students from diverse racial, ethnic and/or cultural backgrounds. (ii) Predominantly white institutions are defined as having higher proportions of white pupils and students and few students from diverse racial, ethnic and/or cultural backgrounds. (iii) State institutions are funded by the English government, adhere to certain regulations such as following the national curriculum and are usually non-academically selective. (iv) Grammar institutions are funded by the English government but are academically selective where an 11 + exam needs to be passed for entrance. (v) Private institutions are fee-paying, usually academically selective, and independent of finance and regulations from the English government. (vi) Sixth form colleges/FE college are dedicated institutions for the study of a wide range of post-16 academic and vocational qualifications.
[c]Type of university: (i) Pre-1992 university = the newly created and/or expanded institutions in the 1960s which were called for in the Robbins Report (1963). Beloff (1968) refers to these as "plate-glass universities", a term he used to describe the different building and architectural style that characterised these institutions. (ii) Elite university = the Russell group of universities which are "24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best in research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector" (Russell Group, 2021). They tend to have higher entry tariffs compared with other universities and the prestigious reputations of the institutions facilitate many opportunities for alumni in the labour market.

"I know I had to do for me cos I am not sure nobody else would": Black women and the burden of care

A recurring theme within interviews was that many of the Black women graduates expressed feeling the "burden of care" for themselves as well as others. This is illustrated in the "pandemic within a pandemic" where Black girls and women have experienced systemic societal exclusion and omission. As demonstrated by the participants, often, the self-care that Black women practice is underpinned by "their need to ameliorate their own conditions for empowerment on their own terms" (Taylor, 1998, p. 235). Yet, particularly within academic settings, additional caring responsibilities are a common experience among Black women (Bass, 2012; Lane, 2018; Magoqwana et al., 2019). This was articulated by Takara who spoke about her own educational experiences as well as those of other Black women students:

> I have so much respect for when I see Black girls and women actually pushing themselves to do better, to do more and I feel like we need to support each other in the best way we can, because so many times y'know, you feel alienated if you are the only one fighting it yourself, the only one trying to better yourself. But actually, I feel there are Black girls out there who actually want to do better but they don't know how to do better because they haven't had the right support to do better. They don't really know what it takes to do better y'know. Like I said for me, I had to learn by myself. (Takara)

Within her account, Takara highlights the additional effort that is exerted by Black women navigating within the education system. She illustrates her awareness of the injustices embedded within the education system that she feels disadvantages herself and other Black women, especially when "fighting it yourself". In this way, she shares her feelings of respect for other Black women because, rather than giving up, Black women like herself are continuing to push against the barriers to do what they need to do to gain educational "success". Yet, she also shows that there are many Black women that are unaware of the barriers that they encounter as they journey through the education system. Takara highlights that this unawareness can lead to alienation and frustration until support is gained from other Black women who are also overcoming similar barriers due to the lack of support that is readily available. From a Bourdiesien lens, the ability to navigate with ease within the education system is down to the connections between field, habitus and capital, which make up his theory of practice. Within Takara's excerpt, the institutional support or lack thereof that she feels is available to Black women students is akin to Bourdieu's concept of capital, which connotes power or trump cards (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Due to the anti-Blackness embedded into the education system, as well as the intersectional nature of the barriers Black women students face, Takara also demonstrates the ways in which Black women are creating their own capital to support themselves and others like themselves to navigate within the education system (Davis, 2019; Yosso, 2005). In this way, it is evident to see that Black women are also challenging the dominant narrative, illustrating their agency and the "ethics of caring" to resist and overcome barriers which are central within both CRT and BFE (Collins, 2000; Solórzano & Delgado, 2001). However, regardless of the capital that some Black women do create, shown via Black women support networks in Takara's account, it is often not recognised in the same way as the capital that middle class white students may utilise (Yosso, 2005). This is an oversight, particularly as these networks provide

> Black women confidants [who] have the cultural capital to provide the type and amount of support that will temper the outcomes of stress … [to] help distressed women navigate toxic environments by providing a sense of security and spiritual guidance and enhancing their self-concept. (Davis, 2019, p. 135)

In the next quote, Joy continues to express the "burden of care" for others as well as herself which she believes also motivates her to be educationally "successful":

> I feel like we [Black girls and women] are constantly made to feel like we are caring for every-body. You care for your dad, your siblings and so it's like you don't have anyone who you feel can care for you. So you care for yourself and you know you have to care for yourself … Yeah I think that that's what spurred me on the most, like I said at the start, I know I had to do for me cos I am not sure nobody else would! (Joy)

Within Joy's extract, she shares how she feels that many Black girls and women must care for "everybody" which she further implies is often unreciprocated when she states that she must find time to care for herself too, because she believes that "nobody else would". This "burden of care" on Black women for "everybody" has roots from the times of slavery and colonialism (Angelou, 1993; Collins, 2000; Graham, 2007; Hurston, 1998; Lewis, 1989). In this way, Joy is suggesting that this "burden of care" becomes part of her habitus, in Bourdieusian terms, where Krais (2006, p. 124) offers a gendered dimension writing that, "through the habitus, the gender classification is integrated

into individual action, forms of social practice, and worldviews. But it is also above all through the habitus that the gender classification is kept alive." In other words, Joy's "burden of care", has been inscribed onto her (and many other Black women) historically and within different contexts based on not only gendered identity, but also her raced one. Joy further divulges that her awareness that she has no one looking after her provides a motivation to focus on her studies and to achieve educational "success" so she can gain, in Bourdieusian terms, capital which can strengthen the support she can provide for herself in the future when navigating the labour market (Fuller, 1982). However, the impact of caring for "everybody" and herself can have long-term mental health implications and impact how much time Joy has available to invest in her learning. This leads to the "Strong Black Woman" stereotype where Black women are viewed "by default, a natural endurer of stress and pain as she carries on the onerous weights and trickle down effects of society's oppressive systems" (Stewart, 2017, p. 32). Interestingly, although Joy's mother is alive, she did not mention her in the "everybody" she feels she must care for which illustrates that she may feel like she does not have to care for her in the same way as others. The final quotation from Ebony centres the role of her mother as a key influence in supporting her educational journey:

> My mum is a single, independent Black woman that don't need no man, she is so strong, she's so everything and more but it's just like how can I match up to someone who's sacrificed everything? Who's gone through every hardship, raised two kids on her own, managed to pay school fees, sacrificed like five, six, seven years of her life just to put me through school, and then turn around and be like "oh yeah I am depressed about this" or "I am anxious about this" or … It just feels very superficial for me to assert my feelings about something when it's just like [speaks as her mum] "Look at what I've sacrificed, look at what I've done, look at all of this … ". How can I have these issues when you've done everything, or you may have had these issues but you have never talked about it because you needed to be strong? (Ebony)

By describing her mother as "a single, independent Black woman that don't need no man", Ebony echoes, through her mother, the sentiment of having to struggle alone as expressed by both Takara and Joy. However, while Takara discusses the power in eventually finding support from other Black women, Ebony alludes to potentially being able to gain the support of her mother, yet she refrains from doing so in fear of being seen as weak, due to what her mother has endured. In many ways, Ebony is illustrating the resilience of her mother to keep going in the face of adversity, though, as she acknowledges, her mother has "never talked about it" with her. Ebony is also displaying the same behaviour of silence. In some ways, by being silent about her own struggles which she feels do not compare to her mother's, Ebony is trying not to add to her mother's own "burden of care". Additionally, Ebony's approach of suppressing her mental health can be viewed as what Yosso (2005, p. 80) defines as asserting her community cultural wealth, like "resistant capital" akin to a racialised form of Bourdieusian capital enabling her to keep going. As Green (2019, p. 280) asserts when researching Black mothers and daughters, this strength to continue despite mental health implications "represents a culturally acceptable way of handling life stressors … woven into the fabric of the racial socialisation of these women". It is this socialisation as well as Ebony's awareness of her mother's strength, endurance and sacrifice which can create additional, internalised pressure for young Black women such as Ebony to gain educational "success" to ensure it is all worthwhile. Moreover, such silences

around mental health in the household and beyond may continue during the "pandemic within a pandemic" in which many Black girls and women may not feel able to share their trauma from the last 18 months with others, due to the fear of being perceived as weaker than their mothers and/or the lack of appropriate support available.

Discussion

The previous research as shown in the extracts from Takara, Joy and Ebony, highlights how their intersecting raced and gendered identities as Black women influence their experiences within the education system (Phoenix, 2009). In various ways, they describe the "burden of care" for themselves and others as a key part of their educational journeys, which resulted in additional and internalised pressure to be educationally "successful". This offers one explanation as to a reason why many Black women are viewed as not requiring or needing institutional support, which endangers their own mental health and wellbeing as recounted by Ebony.

However, with the onset and continuation of both COVID-19 and the unjust, public killing of unarmed Black people as highlighted by Black Lives Matter, the need for dedicated, intersectional support for Black girls and women has only increased. This is because the intersectional barriers they face, as outlined in previous sections, such as historical medical racism and consistent erasure from educational, workplace and health debates, research and coverage, have increased and will continue to intensify. Most recently, this erasure is exemplified by the "pandemic within a pandemic", where Black girls and women are also dying and being killed disproportionately in the same way as Black boys and men are. While the agency, resilience and strength illustrated by many Black girls and women, generation after generation, may make it seem as though they are operating and functioning in a "business as usual" fashion, in many cases they have been forced to continue as normal due to their jobs as essential workers, with few opportunities to take time off to rest and to process their experiences and those of their communities, particularly over the last year and a half.

Conclusion and recommendations

To conclude, it is evident to see why, as a society, we all need to be checkin' for Black girls and women owing to the historical and continuous victimisation that they have been suffering, navigating, and overcoming in silence. For this reason, it is imperative for everyone to be mindful that Black girls and women are human beings and there are limits to how much they can endure (Oladipo, 2021). Moreover, it is so important that we, as a society, extend care and support to Black girls and women by actively dismantling their intersectional oppression, which can create a socially just society for all (Combahee River Collective, 1986).

Recommendations to improve the conditions of Black girls and women both within society and the education system include:

(1) Applying an intersectional lens to the "pandemic within a pandemic" to understand and tailor appropriate support for Black girls and women who are often forgotten.
(2) Embedding intersectional, culturally sensitive mental health and wellbeing support as part of the pandemic recovery in educational and workplace contexts.

(3) Further research centred on the lived experiences of Black girls and women which should be utilised when developing both educational- and health-related policy.

(4) Better provision and access to government, third sector, school and university funding and for these same organisations to consult with and collaborate with organisations such as the Ubele Initiative and Black Students Talk who are already doing work to support marginalised communities, including Black girls and women, as part of the pandemic recovery.

Lastly, to Black girls and women, moving forward, it's time to "check for" yourself first and foremost before checkin' for anyone else. Additionally, it is recommended that:

(1) Self-care is prioritised and practiced regularly. This can include resting, exercising and therapy. Be mindful that "caring for self is not self-indulgence. It is an act of self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare," (Lorde, 1988, p. 205).

(2) Find and create safe spaces and support systems where you can be your true self, reaffirm your humanity and assist in your journey.

(3) Keep the faith and know that as Amia Brave sang in ENNY's (2020) song *Peng Black Girls*:

> We gon' be alright ok,
> Alright ok, alright ok, alright.

Notes

1. The 'b' in 'Black' has purposely been capitalised throughout the paper (but not in quoted work). This is to acknowledge "Black as both an affiliation and an identity" (Gourley, 1975, p. 181).
2. Spearheaded by a Black woman, Yvonne Field.
3. Bourdieu (1986) defines cultural capital as forms of knowledge, communication and values; social capital as connections and resources which are accrued from membership into certain social networks; and symbolic capital as power and status. Although different from economic capital, these intangible capitals can lead to the gaining of tangible economic capital.
4. The focus on the English education system rather than Britain or the United Kingdom was to uphold a level of consistency in the educational accounts shared by participants because of the differences in education systems between the countries of the UK.

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ORCID

April-Louise Pennant http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1963-7832

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