

IMPACT OF
IMMIGRATION



ON AFRICAN &
AFRICAN CARIBBEAN
COMMUNITIES

by Dr Elaine Arnold & Kwame Opoku

Introduction

This information sheet provides an overview, looking at the possible impact of family separation between parents and their children caused by immigration in the British African and African Caribbean communities, along with the intergenerational legacy as a result of this.

Research has shown that one of the factors that can lead to childhood trauma is separation from a parent or substitute parent. The experiences of the migrant generation and fostering of West African children to white carers are used as focal points. Although the dynamics discussed applies to the collective experiences of people of African and African-Caribbean origin in Britain. Additionally, the information sheet is intended to highlight common relationship dynamics that the separation of children from their parents can cause. In particular, if it creates a painful experience for the child leading to unresolved trauma.

Objectives

- ◆ To raise awareness of the emotional and relational impact of separation and loss
- ◆ To increase the understanding of the impact of unresolved trauma;
- ◆ To highlight the cycle of intergenerational trauma;
- ◆ To explore ways of healing from the past and breaking unhealthy cycles.

The importance of love and stability in early childhood

Children need sensitive adults who are consistent in their patterns of behaviour towards them in order to feel safe and secure. The quality of this experience influences how children go on to handle their relationships with peers and teachers; in adulthood, the workplace and those in authority and with their own partners and children. Essentially, their core relationships and more broadly how they relate to other people in the community.

Relationships in which children feel loved, are safe and secure, help them manage their emotions and nurtures their mental and social development. On the other hand, children who experience the opposite, are more likely to “*struggle in these areas and to experience emotional and behavioural difficulties*”¹. The wealth of research and professional experience has confirmed the ideas supported by attachment theory.

One of the experiences that can interfere with the healthy development of a child is separation from a parent(s) or parent substitute in their early years. The age of the child at separation has a significant influence on the impact which can be upsetting, distressing and traumatic for some, especially if the child was “left without emotional preparation for the impending separation”².

Historical context

It is essential to understand the cultural and historical factors that drove immigration. As well as the attitudes held by African and African Caribbean people in Britain towards the separation of parents from their children.

After the Second World War, 1939 – 1945, Britain was in need of labour in order to aid the process of rebuilding the country which had been severely devastated in some areas, particularly London and the industrial cities. ‘Subjects’ from the Caribbean colonies were called upon to help the ‘mother country’, and people with a strong reverence for England responded to the call and came to help. Some brought their children with them, but the majority, who were men and fathers, intended their stay to be temporary. This resulted in leaving partners and children behind in the Caribbean, “*Between 1955 and 1960 adults leaving the Caribbean for the United Kingdom, Canada and the USA took with them, 6,500 children and left behind 90,000*”³. When they found it impossible to return, they sent for their partners.

Although the labour was required, no social provisions had been provided, neither were the local communities informed or prepared for the arrivals from the Caribbean. Prejudice and discrimination was experienced on a number of fronts. There was a hostile reaction to their presence in regards to housing. And in the workplace the pay was less than the English workers and for the most part only menial jobs were offered.

The African wave of migration came in the 1960s and 1970s, most notably from Ghana and Nigeria, in addition to other people from across Africa. They all aspired for a better life through work or further education. This would later lead to a distinct cultural experience in the West African community as parents struggled with the issue of childcare and lack of family support systems that they were previously used to.

The solution, aside from sending children ‘back home’, if that was an option, was the generation of children raised by white foster carers for varying periods of time. In the Caribbean community the practice known as “child-shifting”⁴. Using white child carers was not as extensive in duration of stay or numbers of children involved. The scale of it in the African community where the practice is said to date back to the 1950s become a phenomenon.

“At the end of 1998, the African Advisory Service, now disbanded, estimated there were up to 9,000 West African children in private foster care in this country”⁵. Many were of pre-school age and lived in poor white areas in the counties. Furthermore, a large number of the children were not registered with health visitors or GPs and, as such, were invisible to the authorities. This has had little public discussion within the affected communities to explore and understand the impact of these types of separations and reunions.

The saying, “It takes a village to raise a child” is one that many in the African and African Caribbean communities are familiar with, as it reflects a cultural practice of the family and social network helping to raise children. It is felt

by some that this philosophy made African parents more amenable to putting their children in temporary foster care voluntarily under the pressure of childcare needs with limited options. Some of the other factors that created pressure on African parents included some landlords not permitting children, the demands of being a student and where a single parent or both parents had to work long hours. Consequently parents put their children in foster care for practical and economic reasons.

Amongst a number of considerations, which were not anticipated in regards to possible future impact, were the attitudes and cultural practices of the foster carers and their ability to meet the practical and cultural needs of the children they were looking after. It certainly was not a negative experience for everyone. However, the experience did have a damaging impact on some in terms of identity, relationships with their biological family and with other people within their community.

This is not about being critical of the decision many parents had to make. This is to highlight the influence of those decisions they made. Our understanding of child development has improved immensely since that period of time. The recognition of the consequences of separation and the time, as well as the support children need when reconnected back with their families, was often not proactively planned and implemented.

Broken relationships

The wave of mass immigration from the Caribbean and then Africa led to many family disruptions as parents left their children of differing ages behind in the care of relatives, some were ‘sent back home’ and others were put into the foster care system.

A factor that made relationships hard to maintain, therefore increasing the sense of separation and loss, was the lack of technology to keep parents and their children connected. Before recent advances, some who had

² Separation And Loss, Sadness And Survival – A Caribbean Legacy – Jacqueline Sharpe

³ Attachment in African Caribbean Families – Lennox K. Thomas

⁴ The practice of shifting the responsibilities of childrearing from the biological mother or parents to relatives, close friends, or neighbors - Caribbean Families: Parent-child Relationship

⁵ Losing touch: West African families who choose to send their children to private white foster mothers Joanna Traynor

successful reunions wrote letters, sent and received pictures in order to maintain contact.

The age of the child, the quality and consistency of the relationship influenced the bond and impact of the separation. Young children remember far more than adults think they do and are likely to have actively felt emotions and interpreted the experience in their own child centred ways, such as, being abandoned. Having not bonded with their parents there would be stronger connection to the relatives who nurtured them, for example, aunts, grandmothers and older siblings. This would lead to issues of conflict for some when eventually reunited with parents.

Additional distress would have been caused if children had a strong connection with their parental substitutes, when separated again to join their parents and often new and unknown siblings. Children then also had to deal with the extra challenge of a new and often hostile social environment whilst often having a “*keen sense for home...*”⁶ at the same time.

Furthermore, the experience of loss was exacerbated by separation from sibling(s), extended family, schools and familiar surroundings.

The impact of broken relationships on the child and family

The effects of fragmented family relationships can be very serious and have an influence on children into adulthood in a number of ways.

The effects on children:

- ◆ Lack of trust in others or inability to make friends as there can be a feeling of people being unreliable, “*this person will leave me and not come back*”⁷ ;
- ◆ Belief they are to blame for their parent’s leaving or ‘being sent away’;
- ◆ Lack of self-confidence;
- ◆ Poor self-esteem issues;
- ◆ Irritable, disruptive or angry;
- ◆ Jealousy towards siblings.

The impact of the separation could have been made worse if reunions were unplanned and unstructured. Sadly, numerous first-hand accounts indicate that at times there was no emotional preparation made for blending the family together, meeting new family members and step parents. This could have led to children being distressed and re-traumatised if their past experiences were not acknowledged and addressed.

Many of these children experienced difficulty in their relationships when they were reunited after varying periods of separation. The factors that caused difficulties were:

- ◆ No structure for reconnecting with parents and siblings;
- ◆ Unknown siblings;
- ◆ Loss of relationships with substitute parents;
- ◆ Interference with identity, along with cultural identity issues;
- ◆ Loss of familiar environment;
- ◆ The need to adapt to a new environment which was sometimes hostile inside and outside of the home;
- ◆ Generational differences in response to racism and discrimination faced.
- ◆ Trying to live in two cultures

Intergenerational legacy

The legacy of these experiences will be different for different individuals depending on the nature and extent of what they went through. If it was upsetting or traumatic then it is likely to have a number of unhealthy effects:

- ◆ Poor relationship skills influencing romantic relationships and parenting;
- ◆ Lack of family cohesion;
- ◆ Impact on health, wellbeing and general happiness due to unresolved trauma;
- ◆ Avoidant behaviours in relationships at home, school and workplaces.

What now?

The way forward, if there is recognition of the wounds of the past, is to acknowledge

that there will be a need to do some healing work on oneself.

When talking about the past as referred to in this information sheet, often a response can be, *“What’s the point? It was so long ago.”* or *“I was young when it happened, I don’t remember much of it.”*

To help connect the past with the present, think about these questions:

- ◆ Do you feel anxious or angry when talking about the past?
- ◆ Is there a lack of feeling when thinking about the past?
- ◆ Is there a lack memories at an age where there usually are?

These are some of the indications that the past is very much alive in your present day life and there is a need to get it out of your system. It would be about finding a way to work through the emotions and feelings surrounding the experiences of separation and loss. This facilitates healing and closure by letting go of feelings and beliefs causing you to suffer and interfering with a healthy relationship with yourself, as well as others.

Depending on the quality of existing family relationships, it would be helpful to talk as a family and have individual and collective stories heard. This would help create understanding from each other’s point of view to diffuse grievances held and mistaken beliefs, which are not uncommon.

Taking into consideration the pain or trauma associated with family separation, some people might find it useful to seek professional help and support such as individual therapy, couples therapy or family therapy.

Conclusion

The experience of separation and family breakup as a result of migration from Africa and the Caribbean to Britain has not been harmful for everyone. Yet for some, the experience has been carried over to successive generations. The legacy of intergenerational trauma for those affected has been many, influencing physical and mental health, parenting, romantic lives, family and wider relationships.

The Windrush experience has received a lot of coverage over the years. However, what has not been given much focus when it comes to immigration from Africa and the Caribbean, is the emotional and relational impact that family separation, and at times poor management of reunions, has had on the children concerned, along with the family.

Professional knowledge, such as the ever growing understanding of early childhood experiences, has helped to improve our awareness of the relational and psychological impact of such events. We are now better placed to address the legacy of the past.

This legacy requires those affected to inform themselves so they can start naming the emotions and feelings around the experience, as well as the ability to put how they think, feel and behave into context. It is never too late to deal with the wounds of childhood. Addressing the past helps the person to live a fuller, more satisfying life. It requires attention on a number of levels, primarily starting with themselves and having a positive feeling to their present situation and to the future.

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