

# 1 Racial intermarriage in England

In 1957, an observer could assert with confidence that ‘the “racially” mixed family is an essential feature of race relations in Britain’ (Collins, 1957, p. 23). Newspapers and magazines ran features on the problems of ‘mixed’ marriages, while miscegenation occupied a prominent place in popular consciousness, regarded by racists as a serious threat to the future of Britain and by liberals as the key to racial harmony. Today, interracial families and their problems receive much less attention from the news media and no longer figure significantly in publicly expressed anxieties and hopes concerning Britain’s multiracial future. Indeed, statistical evidence suggests that, since 1957, the proportion of interracial families within the black population of England and Wales has steadily declined, as more West Indian, Asian and African women have come to Britain to join the predominantly male black population already settled here.

The interest of any study of interracial families does not, then, derive from the demographic significance of interracial unions, nor from their ‘typicality’. Indeed, it is precisely the opposite quality that gives the study of such families its importance. Interracial unions are, above all else, the exceptions that prove the rule of ethnic differentiation, the outcome of deviations from a statistical and cultural norm. Interracial marriages are, in popular English parlance, ‘mixed’ marriages, between ‘white’ and ‘coloured’, while the children of such unions are referred to as ‘half-castes’. These commonly used terms indicate, quite clearly, the social significance of this boundary in everyday perceptions. But beyond that, a terminology of this nature reflects the ambiguous position of such families in our society, where ethnicity is a significant component of social identity and an important principle of association and dissociation in social life. To study the everyday lives of interracial families, then, is to study the nature of British race relations as it impinges on the lives of individuals. Through a consideration of the ways in which interracial families handle their ambiguous ethnicity, we can learn a great deal about the tensions and constraints of the ethnically divided society in which they, and we, live.

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[More information](#)*Racial intermarriage in England**The historical context of interracial unions in England, 1555–1945*

The pattern and structure of interracial unions in contemporary Britain inevitably reflect the character of the specific system of race relations of which they form a part. But British attitudes and practice respecting interracial sexual relations have also been shaped by a long history of contact between black and white. This began with the first voyages made by English adventurers to the West African coast in the 1550s, the involvement of the English in the trade in slaves to the New World and the development of the plantation societies of the Americas, and the importation of the first black slaves into England in 1555 (Hakluyt, 1589, p. 97). A consideration of this long and troubled history reveals several significant transformations in the nature of interracial sexual relations over time, together with the gradual evolution of a cluster of attitudes towards miscegenation which continues to have considerable impact today.

It is clear from the earliest published accounts that a strong sense of physical and cultural difference informed the reactions of those Englishmen who, from the sixteenth century onwards, voyaged to the West coast of Africa.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, as one would expect, sexual relations between white men and local women followed upon the establishment of trading posts along the coast; such relations ranged from simple commercial transactions to durable concubinage.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, by the eighteenth century, relationships of this nature were accepted as being a customary aspect of life on the coast, albeit one which occasioned the disapproval of some visitors from Europe. In the English colonies of the Americas, a more brutal sexual exploitation of female slaves by their white masters developed in the context of slave societies. In the Caribbean, such relationships were openly condoned, while on the North American mainland attitudes were markedly more ambivalent (Jordan, 1968, pp. 136–78). Although legal marriage between black and

<sup>1</sup> For general accounts of European ventures on the West African coast, see Blake (1937, 1942); Rodney (1975, pp. 223–325); Fage (1978, pp. 215–88); Curtin *et al.* (1978, pp. 213–48). Excellent analyses of European attitudes towards Africa and Africans in the era of the slave trade may be found in D. B. Davis (1966), and Jordan (1968), while literary images of the negro in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England are discussed by Jones (1965).

<sup>2</sup> Jobson (1623, pp. 35–41) speaks of a well-established population of mixed Portuguese and African descent, living among the westernmost segment of the Mande peoples in the area of the River Gambia. Other references to concubinage, casual sexual encounters and miscegenation on the coast may be found in Barbot (1732, pp. 34, 36, 238); Atkins (1735, pp. 40, 94); Moore (1738, p. 121); W. Smith (1744, p. 213); and Durand (1806; reprinted in Hargreaves, 1969, pp. 65–73). Children of interracial unions played an important role as mediators between Europeans and local society, and, together with the children of prominent indigenous traders, were sometimes sent to Europe for training and education (see, *inter alia*, Brown, 1929, Vol. 1, p. 130 and Vol. 2, pp. 112–15; Tenkorang, 1964, p. 251; Walvin, 1973, pp. 7, 21; Shyllon, 1977, pp. 46–65).

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white was rare in the Americas, it should be pointed out that institutionalised concubinage was common, and led, as on the West African coast, to the emergence of a relatively privileged stratum of ‘Mulattos’, or people of mixed blood, from whose ranks, in turn, further concubines were recruited.<sup>3</sup> Thus, interracial sexual relations in the racially stratified slave societies of the Americas – and, to a lesser extent, in the trading enclaves of the West African coast – took, for the most part, the form of hypergamous concubinage. This, unlike marriage, implied no equality of status between the partners, and the woman and her offspring were not incorporated into the dominant racial ‘caste’ (K. Davis, 1941; Van Den Berghe, 1960). Such a pattern was an inevitable reflection of a system of social relations in which colour – socially defined – and socio-economic status were clearly associated.

In England, the context of interracial sexual relations has always been very different. Black slaves and domestic servants were sufficiently evident in the London of the late sixteenth century for Queen Elizabeth I to order their deportation in a period of famine and unemployment (Walvin, 1973, p. 8). But her ordinances did little to halt the long-term growth of a sizeable black population in the metropolis and other large cities. Among these were free Africans, the sons of prominent traders on the West African coast sent to Europe for education or training (see n. 2, p. 2). However, most, it seems, were imported as domestic servants, although from the sixteenth century onwards we have evidence of free blacks working in a variety of occupations. Black pages enjoyed a considerable popularity with fashionable ladies until the middle of the eighteenth century, and some black household servants, like Francis Barber who worked for Samuel Johnson, held respected and secure posts (Reade, 1912). However, contemporary accounts suggest that most were less fortunate: a predominantly male population, they came as slaves or indentured servants with their masters from the West Indies. Many, once brought to England, ran away or were abandoned to fend for themselves (George, 1925, pp. 134–8; Hecht, 1954, pp. 43–4; Walvin, 1973, pp. 56–9; Shyllon, 1977, pp. 75–83); eighteenth-century sources mention black apprentices, beggars and criminals, as well as a black maritime community (George, 1925, pp. 134, 137).

In 1772, during the Somerset case – which resulted in the ending of legally enforceable slavery in England – the black population of the country was estimated to be between 14,000 and 15,000; other estimates made in the latter half of the eighteenth century ranged from 3,000 to 30,000 (Walvin, 1973, p. 46). Most of these black Britons were resident in the capital where, unlike other immigrant groups, they did not form

<sup>3</sup> The scope and nature of sexual relations between white men and black women in the slave societies of the Americas has been the subject of much debate; see, *inter alia*, Frazier (1937); Freyre (1946); Boxer (1963, pp. 13–16, 27–39); O. Patterson (1967, pp. 159–62); Johnston (1970); Martinez-Alier (1974); Gutman (1975, pp. 158–60 and 1976, pp. 388–404); Genovese (1976, pp. 413–31).

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[More information](#)*Racial intermarriage in England*

a geographically discrete community. Evidence suggests, however, that they did form a close-knit social world, united by their common oppression in slavery and the adversities of their position once free (Dover, 1943, p. 159; Hecht, 1954, pp. 48–9). While there is no evidence for any consistently expressed hostility towards blacks on the part of the ordinary populace of London – indeed, rather the opposite seems to have been the case (Hecht, 1954, p. 46) – the uncertainties of their legal position and their limited range of skills made it difficult for servants out of place to find employment.

From the 1770s onwards, the activities of Granville Sharp and other anti-slavery campaigners, together with the vigorous response of their opponents, directed public attention to the problem of the ‘black poor’ (Walvin, 1973, p. 48; Shyllon, 1974; D. B. Davis, 1975, pp. 343–468; Anstey, 1975 and 1976; Drescher, 1976). The arrival of numbers of black seamen, disbanded at the end of the American War of Independence, as well as of black Loyalists, made matters worse. A small proportion of this population was lost through re-emigration, to the Caribbean and to the newly formed colony of Sierra Leone (Fyfe, 1962, pp. 13–37; West, 1970; Norton, 1973); most, however, were simply absorbed, socially and biologically, into the mass of London’s white poor. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the number of new black residents declined sharply; in 1814, the plight of destitute Negroes was drawn to the attention of Parliament, but some fifty years later Mayhew, in his surveys of London life and labour, found few black servants and only a very few black mendicants (George, 1925, p. 138; Walvin, 1973, pp. 189–99). Blacks were still to be found, however, as seamen in the dockland districts of London, Cardiff, Liverpool and elsewhere; and it was these districts that formed the nuclei of the ‘coloured quarters’ of the twentieth century, to which a new wave of black migrants, drawn to England to serve in her army and navy and to supplement her attenuated labour force in two world wars, made their way (Little, 1947, pp. 52–102; Walvin, 1973, pp. 202–15).

The history of black settlement in England, up to the middle of the twentieth century, is therefore the history of a racial minority, predominantly male, who for obvious demographic reasons have always drawn their sexual partners from the host population. In 1578, George Best, in a discussion of the origin of skin pigmentation among ‘blacke Mores’, had remarked that ‘I my selfe have seene an Ethiopian as blacke as a cole broughte into Englande, who taking a fair Englishe woman to wife, begatte a sonne in all respectes as blacke as the father was. . .’ Two centuries later, the white Jamaican writer Edward Long, after accusing the black population of London of idleness and dissolute living, went on to assert that

The lower class of women in England, are remarkably fond of the blacks, for reasons too brutal to mention. . . By these ladies they generally have a numerous brood. Thus in the course of a few generations more, the English blood will

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[More information](#)*The context of interracial unions in England, 1555–1945*

be so contaminated by the mixture and from the chances, the ups and downs of life, this alloy may spread so extensively, as even to reach the middle, and then the higher orders of the people, till the whole nation resembles the *Portuguese* and *Moriscos* in complexion of skin and baseness of mind. (Long, 1772)

Other eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century accounts, by observers less racist than Long – a notable campaigner for the continuance of slavery and the African and West Indian trade – remark upon the willingness of women of the ‘lower orders’ of English society to enter into unions with black men (Walvin, 1973, pp. 52–5). Perhaps the attraction of the exotic, and the relatively favourable position enjoyed by some black servants at the time, had something to do with this. Many blacks were, however, poor, and it is to be expected that their partners would be drawn from the same depressed stratum of society; it seems that at least some of the white women who made the ill-fated journey to Sierra Leone in 1787 were prostitutes (Fyfe, 1962, p. 17; Norton, 1973).

It is impossible to determine, now, what were the prevailing attitudes towards interracial unions in the eighteenth century. It seems that many of the upper classes viewed such liaisons, the amours of servants and the lower orders, with a certain amount of tolerant condescension. Others, like Long, translated the ideology of black inferiority which had been fashioned in the slave societies of the Americas into the language of a new scientific racism, and opposed miscegenation on eugenic and moral grounds. The evolution of English racial thought is a complex subject that can only be adumbrated here. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century, European awareness of differences in physical appearance and in culture had crystallised into a number of conflicting patterns of thought, which, despite their differences, all drew upon a widely accepted classification of humanity into different varieties, or ‘races’, to which were attributed not simply differentiated physical characteristics, but also differing mental and moral capabilities (see, for example, Linnaeus, 1758; Burnet, 1773; Long, 1774, Vol. 2; Home, 1788; Blumenbach, 1865; Hunter, 1865; Hume, 1898, cited in Curtin, 1964, Vol. 1, p. 42). Stereotypes concerning Negro amorality, sexuality and lustfulness, together with others which assert the stupidity, brutality, and savagery of the African, may be traced back to the earliest English interpretations of African society and culture. Such stereotypes were to be given new impetus in the course of the nineteenth century by the ideology of an expansive imperialism, by proselytising Christianity, and by the cruder theories of social Darwinism and evolutionism (Count, 1946; Curtin, 1964; Burrow, 1966; Banton, 1967 and 1977; Stocking, 1968; Kiernan, 1969; Bolt, 1971; Haller, 1971; Poliakov, 1974; Street, 1975; Biddiss, 1976 and 1979; Barker, 1978; Lorimer, 1978). And with the development of scientific racism came the notion that not only were those of African descent of inferior racial stock, but also that

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[More information](#)*Racial intermarriage in England*

miscegenation was a physically harmful and socially dangerous process.

It is one of the ironies of history that the nineteenth century, which witnessed the full flowering of that scientific racism which was to play a crucial role in shaping the racist attitudes of today, was an epoch in which the issue of race relations was one of little domestic importance in England (Lorimer, 1978). Miscegenation was a subject of debate in the context of learned societies, or in discussion of the affairs of the colonies or of America, but one cannot infer from such discussions very much concerning popular attitudes in England itself. However, it is, perhaps, significant that the offence taken by the local white population at the development of sexual relationships between black men and white women was cited by contemporary accounts as one of the principal causes of the race riots that occurred in Liverpool, Cardiff, London and elsewhere in the summer of 1919 (Little, 1947, pp. 57–60; Walvin, 1973, pp. 203–10; Henriques, 1974, pp. 140–3). Economic tensions, and especially competition for employment in the unfavourable conditions of 1919, were clearly responsible for much of the hostility directed towards the visible, and therefore vulnerable, black dockland communities. The selection of interracial sexual relationships as a significant issue reflects, however, not simply local social tensions, but also the focusing of concern upon one aspect of race relations in the English context: the dangers and problems of miscegenation.

*The situation after 1945*

As in the First World War, the years 1939–45 saw the arrival in Britain of large numbers of West Indians and Africans, as soldiers, sailors and industrial workers. Many of these returned home in 1945, but others stayed to swell the population of the well-established ‘coloured quarters’ in which most of England’s black population then lived. Between 1947 and 1957, a number of social scientists, their interest stimulated by the growth in black immigration in the post-war years, published a series of studies of such districts (Little, 1947; Richmond, 1954; Banton, 1955; Collins, 1957) which, for the first time, offer information about interracial relationships at the local level. Here, as in earlier settlements, the black population was predominantly male, and interracial liaisons were the norm. There was much deeply-felt prejudice amongst the local white population against black people, who were perceived as savages, as criminals, and as physically frightening and repulsive. There was also much hostility towards those prepared to enter into an interracial relationship. It is hardly surprising that such women tended to be socially disadvantaged themselves, in some respect or other: prostitutes and ex-prostitutes, girls rejected by their families after bearing an illegitimate child, migrants with poor social resources from other areas of England, the mentally subnormal or unstable. Consensual unions

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Susan Benson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The situation after 1945*

were frequent, as were casual, short-term associations. The hostility of white society, coupled with the depressed social and economic position of the black community on the margins of English society, ensured that interracial couples moved largely in a black social world, as did their children. Women, once associated with black men, found it difficult to find white partners at a later date; they thus tended to be incorporated into the social universe of the 'coloured quarter', and to identify with its interests (Collins, 1951; Richmond, 1954, pp. 18, 77, 83; Banton, 1955, pp. 150–81; Little, 1972, pp. 138–40).

At the same time, it appears that there were local variations. Collins, writing of the stable, well-established community of Africans and Asians in South Shields, suggested that the identification of white spouses with this predominantly Muslim community was strong. The more able of such women acted as mediators between the black population and the wider white society, and were often instrumental in obtaining jobs for their menfolk; as a result, they could earn a respected place in the black community (Collins, 1951 and 1957, p. 24). In a less well-ordered district such as Stepney, however, white consorts played no such role. Indeed, Banton (1955, pp. 150–81) suggests that the attitudes of such women towards their black partners were often ambivalent, and that the opportunism often implicit in such relationships – on both sides – led to a mutual distrust and contempt.

A similar sense of distrust emerges from accounts of life in England given by those colonial students who found themselves in England in the 1950s and the early 1960s. Speaking of relations with English women, one West Indian student recalled that 'It seemed rare to find a close... relationship which was simply a friendship, not a love-affair or a bed-arrangement' (Tajfel & Dawson, 1965, p. 20). A more general complaint was that those women prepared to enter into some kind of relationship with them were generally of a lower social class and educational level than themselves (Carey, 1956; Banton, 1959, pp. 140–4).

The nature of post-war black immigration into Britain radically altered the demographic structure of the black population, and with it the demographic imperatives for interracial unions. The 1961, 1966 and 1971 censuses show a gradual reduction in the proportion of men to women in all categories of the British population born in the 'New Commonwealth' – the Commonwealth countries of Africa, Asia, the Mediterranean and the Caribbean. This was especially significant in the case of the Caribbean-born population, among whom, by 1971, women outnumbered men (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2). This tendency was evident by the late 1950s, but the assimilationist perspective of most researchers writing at that time led them to overlook its implications; instead, they argued that racial intermarriage would play an important role in assimilation and integration. Collins (1957, p. 23) regarded the interracial family as an 'essential feature' of British race relations; Banton (1955,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Racial intermarriage in England*Table 1.1. *Ratio, males per 100 females, by date of entry into the United Kingdom and place of birth: Great Britain, 1971*

Place of birth	Date of entry				All years
	Before 1954	1955–1961	1962–1966	After 1967	
Africa	174	224	163	127	147
West Indies	167	120	65	65	98
India	122	190	147	82	127
Pakistan and Bangladesh	238	235	424	135	286
British Isles	—	—	—	—	94

From Lomas (1973), p. 79, table 3.5.

Table 1.2. *Ratio, males per 100 females, by place of birth: England and Wales, 1961, 1966, 1971*

Place of birth	1961	1966	1971
Africa*	(195)	(161)	(122)
West Indies	125	105	99
India	157	148	124
Pakistan and Bangladesh	538	354	295

\* Figures in brackets refer to West African Commonwealth countries only. All categories save those in brackets amended to exclude those not of New Commonwealth ethnic origin.

From Lomas (1973), tables 3.6, C.5; Rose *et al.* (1969), table 11.1.

p. 151) suggested that the arrival of large numbers of women from the Caribbean, Africa and Asia would lead to many marriages between themselves and the males of the host population; Sheila Patterson (1963, p. 359), in her study of Brixton, guessed that, over time, the 'adaptation and advancement' she predicted for the West Indian population of the area would 'lead to closer social relationships with the local population, and probably to increased intermarriage and to an at least partial biological absorption of the West Indians in the local population...'

Patterson's optimism was belied by her own evidence: in the Brixton of the late 1950s, she could find 'only about a dozen' interracial families, about half of which involved 'old-timers' resident in England from the



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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The situation after 1945*

inter-war years. Then, as in Stepney, there were numerous relationships between West Indian men and those Patterson termed the 'casuals', some of whom she described as 'low-class, professional prostitutes. Most, however, seem to be young girls, usually from the rural areas of England and Ireland.' White spouses played no prominent role within the black community, and such relationships were not favourably regarded by the local white population, whose reactions ranged from indifference to intense hostility (Patterson, 1963, p. 280).

Evidence from other, more recent, community studies suggests that Brixton was not untypical in this respect. Hill (1965, p. 222) reports that in the year ending in March 1963, the 1000 parish priests questioned in areas of immigrant settlement solemnised only 84 marriages between 'white' and 'coloured'; Rex and Moore (1967, p. 68) recorded only thirteen interracial households among the 232 interviewed in the area they term 'Sparkbrook 1' in Birmingham, and none in the other two Sparkbrook zones; Richmond (1973, p. 74) found 'very few interracial marriages and little cohabitation' in his 1965 survey of the St Paul's area of Bristol.

If the question of racial intermarriage played an important role in the analysis of social scientists concerning the future of Britain's new black population, it played an equally important role in popular consciousness of the nature of this new, and, to many, threatening immigration. Banton's survey (1959, pp. 203–7) of English attitudes in six areas outside London led him to conclude that the proportion disapproving of racial intermarriage 'definitely lies over 45 per cent'. Gallup polls in 1958 and 1961, quoted by Patterson (1963, p. 278), report 71% and 68% as hostile, while Hill (1965) found that 91% of his sample disapproved of racial intermarriage. A 1970 Gallup poll, of teenagers only, recorded that 41% of those interviewed would not consider dating a partner 'of a different colour', while 50% would not consider marriage (*Daily Telegraph* 30 July 1970). A small study of adult English males in a provincial town (Wells, 1970) recorded 68% of respondents as hostile to the idea of their daughter marrying a West Indian, although even higher percentages – 75% and 77% – objected to Indians and Pakistanis respectively. Much of the variation in these results is attributable to differences in survey location, the composition of the sample, and to variation in the phrasing of the question itself. The general conclusion is, however, clear: despite some tendency towards greater tolerance over time, interracial marriage remains the object of considerable disapproval on the part of the white, adult, English population.

Hostility towards miscegenation, however, is more than a simple reflection of changing English perceptions of 'social distance', to be assessed in conjunction with other data on attitudes towards black neighbours, or black workmates. Between the arrival of the first significant numbers of post-war black immigrants in 1948, and the crystallisation of xenophobic anxieties around the twin issues of rates

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Susan Benson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Racial intermarriage in England*

of 'coloured' immigration and the increasing black population of Britain's inner cities, which occurred between 1964 and 1968, miscegenation acted as the focus of much broader anxieties. The question of interracial sexual unions was perceived as an important issue, and one to which newspapers and magazines were prepared to give publicity.

*Interracial unions and the press*

The marriages of well-known black men and women to white spouses have always been seen as 'news' by the British press, but have usually been reported in a neutral manner. However, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, newspapers, especially the 'popular' press and those with local or parochial readerships, were prepared to give prominence to the opinions of those for whom miscegenation represented a threat to English society and culture. In 1963, for example, the *Morning Advertiser* (6 August 1963) reported the plea for 'chastity' made by Dr Ernest Caxton, Assistant Secretary to the British Medical Association, to remove 'the fears of mixed marriages resulting in children of mixed blood that are becoming an increasing problem'. Wider coverage was given to the pronouncements of Dr J. W. Hall, Medical Officer for the Borough of Barrow-on-Soar, Leicestershire, when, in May 1965, he asserted that racial intermarriage threatened the 'national characteristics' of the British, and to those of the various politicians who, between 1964 and 1968, deployed a fear of miscegenation in their argument for tighter immigration controls.

Newspapers were also prepared to publish gloomy letters from the public on the same theme. Such epistles, often combining popular interpretations of the doctrines of scientific racism with a crude and unreflective chauvinism, make fascinating, if distasteful, reading. One example of the genre is indicative: a letter from a lady in Kingston-upon-Thames, complaining that 'immigrants' – in other words, black people – were responsible for Britain's housing shortage.

...with their extremely high birth-rate it has been estimated that by the end of the century through intermarrying with us they will completely have mongrelised the British race... it is idle to imagine that character will remain unchanged. The irresponsibility of the negro and the fatalism of the Asian will have passed into our make-up and we shall never be the same again.

Do we really want to see our island peopled with either Mullattoes or Eurasians? The Marxists do, as a hybrid race – with its diminished patriotism – is much easier to manipulate than a thoroughbred with its roots in its country's age old traditions... The Devil would like to see us, the race which has done most to Christianise the world, disappear. (*English Churchman*, 10 April 1964)

Journalists themselves recognised that cases combining interracial sex with crime and 'depravity' were 'good copy'; as one told Sheila Patterson during her research in Brixton, 'Sex and colour are always news. When they come together the effect is more than doubled.'