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RESEARCH ARTICLE



A decolonizing, intersectional, Black feminist approach to young Black Caribbean-Canadian mothers' resilience

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ABSTRACT

Growing research documents how systemic anti-Black racism leads to negative physical and mental health outcomes for Black populations, including Black mothers. There is also increasing attention to the concept of resilience as a way of theorizing how Black persons draw on strategies and resources to avoid, overcome or recover from these experiences. This paper, guided by a decolonial framework, intersectional theories and Black feminist epistemologies, reports on key findings from a qualitative, community-based study of young Black motherhood, which included in-depth interviews and focus groups with 13 Black Caribbean-Canadian mothers in the Greater Toronto Area. We demonstrate how barriers caused by anti-Black racism, gender inequalities, xenophobia, and classism operate in the lives of young Black mothers, and we reconfigure resilience from a Eurocentric, individualized concept towards a feminist intersectional one. Findings challenge the conceptualization of 'normal', universal, and time-bound development privileged in resilience research; demonstrate that the adversities young Black Caribbean-Canadian mothers encounter in trying to care and provide for their families are rooted in the cumulative intersectional impacts of racialized, gendered, xenophobic, and classed experiences, contexts, and policies across the life course; and highlight the critical importance of working with decolonizing research processes, intersectionality theories, and Black feminist epistemologies.

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Resilience; young Black Caribbean-Canadian mothers; intersectionality; anti-Black racism

Introduction

There is a growing body of research in Canada on how systemic anti-Black racism is connected to negative physical and mental health outcomes for Black women, especially Black mothers (e.g. Etowa et al., 2017; Nestel, 2012; United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHOR], 2017). According to a recent Canadian report 'Black women living in Canada face unquestionable health disparities and unnecessary poor health outcomes due to marginalization and social exclusion' and 'the cumulative impact of racism, discrimination, poverty and other structural and systemic inequalities profoundly impact

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the physical, emotional and mental health of all Black women in Canada' (The Canadian Center for Policy Alternative [CCPA], 2019, p. 31; see also the African Canadian Legal Clinic [ACLC], 2008; James, 2019). The Canadian Census, (completed every five years), reported that in 2016, one-quarter of Black Canadian women lived below the poverty line – approximately double the rate for White women – and that Black women are twice as likely to be unemployed compared to White women (e.g. 12.2% vs 6.4%) (Statistics Canada, 2016).

Research on how Black mothers, and particularly young Black mothers, successfully respond to and navigate the challenges of negative life events strongly focuses on their use of individualized strategies and resources to avoid, overcome, or recover from these experiences, that is, how they enact *resilience* (e.g. Barto et al., 2015; Haight et al., 2009). Despite the important contributions made by these studies, resilience remains a primarily psychological concept that does not fully account for how historic and ongoing structural and systemic inequities shape the daily lives of Black mothers. This is reflected in some researchers' reliance on a universalized definition of 'normal development' and their emphasis on individualized coping skills and abilities (see Haight et al., 2009; Mantovani & Thomas, 2015; Mukuna & Aloka, 2021). A small but growing body of resilience research with and about formerly colonized populations, however, has adopted a decolonized concept of resilience that attends to the relational and intersecting impacts of historic and ongoing oppressive socio-economic contexts and everyday experiences (see Atallah, 2017; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Reid, 2018). In this paper, we build on these efforts. Guided by a decolonizing, intersectional, Black feminist, approach to resilience, we aim to demonstrate how a reconfigured conceptualization of resilience that considers the lifelong interplay of individual and collective agency and structural conditions (specifically those shaped by multiple intersections of race/ethnicity, immigrant status, class, gender, and age) can facilitate interventions to support families led by young Black mothers.

This paper is informed by our recent qualitative and community-based study with young Black Caribbean-Canadian mothers in Canada's largest urban area, the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Over a two-year period (2018–2020), we engaged 13 women in two sets of interviews – one focusing on their childhood and adolescent years and the other on their current mothering experiences – and a focus group about their recommendations for social and policy supports for young Black mothers in Canada. All but one of the participants were second-generation immigrants and nine were of low socio-economic status (SES).

This paper is organized as follows. First, we briefly discuss the development of the dominant conceptualization of resilience, mainly from the fields of child development and developmental psychology, and outline two key problems in resilience research with young Black mothers and point to pathways forward. Second, we provide a short overview of the community-based research study we conducted, including the theoretical, methodological, and epistemological approach that guided our research. Third, we lay out key findings, which focus on education, economic barriers, partner relationship challenges, and three forms of racialized and gendered policies in relation to childcare and parental leave, student loans, and social welfare; we also highlight issues that must be taken into account in resilience research about young Black mothers. Finally, we outline four implications that emerge from our research.

Background

Resilience for young Black mothers

The psychological concept of resilience refers mainly to the process of how individuals positively adapt their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours to overcome, avoid, or recover from adversity (see Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2001). In the 1960s and 70s, child development psychology researchers in the US began using the term ‘resilience’ to describe this observable phenomenon (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten et al., 1990), maintaining that it would enable them to create better interventions aimed at improving individual children’s chances of ‘normal’ human development (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2001; Wright et al., 2013). From the outset, resilience research has used empirical data about the actions, qualities, and resources of individuals who have successfully adapted to adversities to determine which psychosocial programme elements can help similar individuals successfully deal with comparable adversities and continue on a ‘normal’ developmental path (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Southwick et al., 2014).

Early researchers created the resilience studies lexicon using constructs, such as ‘adversity’, from child development and developmental psychology and psychopathology studies, adding or emphasizing others, like ‘positive adaptation’ and ‘normal development’ to reflect the strengths-focus of their concept of resilience (Masten, 2001; Wright et al., 2013). Child Development researchers define positive adaptation as individuals’ adjustment of their actions, thoughts, and feelings when faced with adversity, to competently meet various stage-specific milestones over the life course (Luthar et al., 2000; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Masten, 2001). Adversity is considered a significant event that threatens the achievement of specific outcomes deemed indicative of ‘normal’ development (see Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2001; Wright et al., 2013), which is conceptualized as an individual’s uneventful progression through various life stages, mastering the requisite psychosocial skills and milestones associated with each stage and as expected within a given historical or cultural context (see Masten et al., 1990; Wright et al., 2013). Significantly, these foundational concepts were not grounded in critical examination of the daily lived experiences of formerly colonized peoples or their descendants (see Atallah, 2017; Wexler, 2014).

Current resilience research on young Black mothers, based largely on Black Americans, typically preserves this original lexicon. Normal development outcomes are usually operationalized as the completion of the level of education required to secure a job that enables a young Black mother to independently provide for herself and her family (see Barto et al., 2015; Mukuna & Aloka, 2021) and parenthood prior to becoming economically independent is implicitly treated as a key adversity that derails normal development (see Trusty-Smith, 2013; Weed et al., 2000). Resilience researchers focus on illuminating the individual strategies and resources of those who have managed to successfully adapt to any challenges young Black mothers might face in completing their education and securing jobs (see Haight et al., 2009; Kennedy, 2005). For example, scholars have documented that young Black mothers who are able to successfully provide for their families possess particular individual attributes, such as a strong sense of identity and self-esteem, goal orientation, and personal ambition (see Breen & McLean, 2010; Malindi, 2018; Solivan et al., 2015). Others have reported that young Black mothers with positive, accepting, and supportive mentors and relationships

(with grandmothers, teachers, other community mothers, children's fathers, social workers, and peers), strong cultural beliefs, and connections with community-based services are also able to successfully complete their education and provide for their families (see Mantovani & Thomas, 2015; Mukuna & Aloka, 2021; Solivan et al., 2015). These findings seem to indicate that effective psychosocial interventions for young Black mothers should enhance their social supports and relationships with family, mentors or teachers, and peers, and should reinforce their individual competence and capabilities – their agency, reflexivity, and decision making and goal planning skills (see Barnet et al., 2007; Barto et al., 2015; Breen & McLean, 2010). Although this work does offer important insights for practitioners seeking to empower and support young Black mothers, there are two significant concerns with how current resilience studies understand and research young Black motherhood. The first stems from Euro-Western and liberal interpretations of human development; the second is an individualization of dealing with difficulties and corresponding lack of attention to intersectionality.

Concerns with resilience research about young Black mothers

Euro-Western and liberal interpretations of human development

Apart from a few studies (see Silver, 2008; Singh & Naicker, 2019), resilience research on young Black mothers is still largely predicated on a conceptualization of normal development as steady progress towards independence from others, including the state, via completing one's education and securing employment (see Barto et al., 2015; Malindi, 2018). However, we assert that this conceptualization reflects a specific, Euro-Western, liberal interpretation of human development that does not account for the racialized and gendered experiences and difficulties that can affect the developmental trajectories of young Black women and, hence, their achievement of specific milestones (see critiques by Crafter, 2015; O'Dell et al., 2017). Indeed, the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives (2019) reported that due to systemic barriers and social disparities, Black women and girls in Canada generally meet the mainstream developmental milestones of young adulthood – particular levels of education, employment, and financial independence that are typically held up as markers of readiness to parent – later than their White Canadian peers. Although feminist research as far back as the 1980s has provided ample critiques of how human development models are located in liberal and male conceptions of human development (e.g. Gilligan, 1982), less attention has been given to how gender intersects with race, ethnicity, social class, and immigrant status in determining what normal human development actually entails.

Individualization of resilience

By focusing mainly on young Black mothers' individual psychological functioning, resilience research obscures how intersecting social identities – especially race/ethnicity, gender, social class, and immigrant status – and related structural contexts shape the adversities that young Black mothers face while also constraining their individual efforts to avoid, overcome, or recover from these adversities. Canadian reports suggest that young Black women encounter many structural and systemic barriers and inequities due to their various social identities (ACLC, 2015; UNHOR, 2017), and American and

British research on Black motherhood demonstrate that historic and current intersectional structural inequalities grounded in racism, gender bias, and classism can negatively shape the everyday lives of Black mothers (e.g. Dow, 2019; Reynolds, 2005). Hegemonic representations of motherhood based on racist and classist stereotyping have been shown to be harmful for Black mothers and adversely shape their decisions and experiences of mothering and paid work (see Dow, 2016; Elliott et al., 2015; Leath & Mims, 2021). In other words, evidence suggests that the intersecting social identities of Black women are integral to their individual experiences of providing for their families; this must be critically accounted for in resilience studies with them.

A feminist, intersectional approach interrogates how intersecting identities, structured relations and ‘oppressions work together in producing injustice’ (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 18). In this paper, we focus on intersections of race, immigrant status, class, gender, and age and processes of ‘relationality, social context, power, inequality, social justice, and complexity’ (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 38). Guided by a decolonizing, intersectional, Black feminist approach to resilience, we aim to demonstrate how a reconfigured conceptualization of resilience that attends to the lifelong interplay of individual and collective agency and structural contexts (specifically those shaped by multiple intersections of race/ethnicity, immigrant status, class, gender, and age) can facilitate interventions to support families led by young Black mothers.

Researching young Black motherhood

A community-university research study

From 2018 to 2020, we conducted a study with an Afrocentric, Black-led community-based organization, TAIBU Community Health Center, that serves the Black community in the GTA. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Board at Brock University (#18-311). Our research team consisted of a young Black Caribbean-Canadian mother of two (Author D), two Black staff members who worked with youth/Black mothers, a Black Caribbean PhD student new to Canada (Author A), and a White Canadian professor (Author B). The first year of the project entailed a slow process of relationship building, which started with a caution from the community organization’s director that there was a history of distrust between this specific Black Canadian community and university researchers. We thus engaged in frank and direct conversations with each other about the experiences, needs, and concerns of all stakeholders, including the community, community members involved in the project, the community organization, and the academics (see Goddard-Durant et al., 2021).

Our research aimed to understand and theorize the systemic and structural challenges faced by young Black mothers in Canada’s largest city. This question was important to TAIBU CHC. Although we approached young Black motherhood as inclusive of many cultural and national identities, the community we worked with included many Caribbean-Canadian families. Our intersectional approach highlights the particularity of structuring and identity-related dimensions in research and our team had a deep knowledge of Caribbean culture (the field work and some of the analysis was done by three Black Caribbean-Canadian researchers). We thus focused on the specificities of Caribbean-Canadian immigrant families’ realities.

Decolonizing, intersectional, Black feminist epistemologies

While we drew on a number of thinkers to build our epistemological approach to this research, this article specifically reflects how our framework was shaped by ideas about decolonizing methodology, intersectionality and Black feminist epistemologies. Specifically, our thinking was shaped by the call from decolonial scholars to intentionally move away from uncritically reproducing colonialist, neocolonialist and neoliberal ideologies and associated power dynamics in the research process from conceptualization to dissemination (see Adams et al., 2015; Martín-Baró, 1994). We also drew on the concept of intersectionality, developed by Black feminist scholars to describe how intersecting social categories such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and age interact to create structural and experiential inequalities and oppressions with multiple effects (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Hill Collins, 2009). As a theoretical approach, intersectionality explores 'relationality, social context, power, inequality, social justice, and complexity' (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 38). Black feminist epistemologies, specifically four of Hill Collins' foundational epistemological tenets, guided our research processes. These tenets are (i) 'Lived experience as a criterion of meaning' (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 257); (ii) engaging in dialogue 'in assessing knowledge claims' (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 260), not only between researcher and participants, but with participants' wider communities; (iii) knowledge making is connected to 'the ethics of caring', which means focusing on 'individual uniqueness', the role of emotions in dialogue, and 'developing the capacity for empathy' (Hill Collins, 2009, pp. 262–263); and (iv) an 'ethic of personal accountability', recognizing that 'knowledge claims made by an individual respected for their moral and ethical connections to their ideas' will carry more weight, especially when it is clear that a researcher 'really cared about [their] topic' (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 265).

The involvement of our community partner was critical for gaining the trust of many of the research participants. Partly because of the community's past negative relationships with university researchers and partly out of a desire to maximize an Afrocentric approach, it was decided that Author B (the senior White researcher who had secured the funding for this project) would play a behind-the-scenes role in the research interviews. Guided by Hill Collins' second tenet of Black feminist epistemology – to encourage a dialogue and moral and ethical connections between researcher/researched – we were aware that a particular researcher's presence and appearance (in this case due to their race and skin colour) might affect research interactions and participants' comfort with sharing their life stories (see Chadderton, 2012; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Author A and the two Black peer researchers who were employed by the community organization conducted all the telephone screenings and interviews.

Research sample

We initially worked to obtain a sample of young Black mothers through our community partner, but after more than six months of recruiting we had secured only a small sample of mothers. We then widened the age range for 'young motherhood' from 18–26 to 16–29. This decision was based on Canadian data that revealed that many Black women and girls were meeting the mainstream developmental milestones of young adulthood typically held up as indicative of readiness to parent – education, employment, and

financial independence – later than their peers due to systemic barriers and social disparities (CCPA, 2019). We also connected with Black mothering groups and through this outreach, combined with the intensive recruitment efforts of our community-based peer researcher, we gained a sample of 13 Black Caribbean-Canadian mothers aged 16–29 who had given birth to their first child by their mid-20s. The women’s educational levels were primary school (14%), high school (29%), and post-secondary (57%). All but one of the women were second-generation immigrants; she was a first generation immigrant. The majority (9/13) were low SES (see Table 1).

Data collection and analysis

Each research participant engaged in two in-depth interviews in 2019 about her life growing up as a Black Caribbean-Canadian girl and her experiences as a young Black mother within the Canadian context. Using narrative and photo-elicitation methods, the young women were invited to provide photographs of their childhood families and the families they had made to guide the discussions about their lived experiences. The young women were also offered the opportunity to create visual collages of what they wanted their family lives to look like in the future and what they needed to achieve this.

We developed our interview guide through extensive consultation with our community partner and peer researcher. For the individual interviews, our thematic areas focused on a participant’s family, community, and cultural backgrounds; memorable experiences and challenges from their childhood and adolescent years; their current daily lives as mothers; experiences with and perceptions of programmes, policies, and supports; and looking ahead to their future. Five of the mothers also participated in two focus groups (2019–2020) to discuss their experiences of accessing parenting resources and supports, and specific recommendations for what programmes and policies could be developed or improved for young Black mothers. The number of participants reflects a precise recruitment time frame, which was ultimately extended, and the team’s shared view that we had sufficiently rich data to begin writing. Having completed the face-to-face interviews just before the 2020 pandemic lockdowns and the closure of schools and childcare centres in Toronto, we did not want to further burden participants. All participants were compensated in gift cards for their time at the hourly minimum wage rate for the region where they resided.

Data analysis entailed an approach that drew together the methodological expertise of the two lead researchers and our alignment with all four of Hill Collins’ tenets of Black feminist epistemologies. As the COVID-19 pandemic restricted in-person group work, data analyses were done via Zoom. To ensure that the readings of the stories and contexts resonated with some of the everyday experiences of the mothers in our study, data analysis started with our team’s young Black mother peer researcher (Author D), identifying themes across stories and providing context. This was followed by weekly analysis meetings (between Author A and Author B) over eight weeks, using an adaptation of the Listening Guide narrative approach to data analysis, combined with Margaret Somers (1994) onto-epistemological multi-layered narrative approach (see Doucet, 2018). Our narrative analysis approach involved four readings of each transcript which began with centring women’s stories and acknowledging the reflexive positionality of researchers in co-producing data. We sought to emulate a ‘narrative method [that] requires that

**Table 1.** Participant Demographics.

No.	Participant pseudonym	Age	Age at 1st child	No. of children	1st child age	2nd child age	Relationship status	Family structure	Current housing status	Education level
1.	Lisa	26	19	1	7 yrs	NA	Partnered	Single mom	Subsidized housing single	Primary
2.	Kendra	22	21	1	6 mths	NA	Single	Single mom	Subsidized housing with mother	University
3.	Naja	29	18	2	11 yrs	10 yrs	Single	Single mom	Condo rental	College
4.	Jay	22	17	1	4 yrs	NA	GF	Cohabiting with partner and her child	Townhouse rental	High School
5.	Shanti	26	24	1	22 mths	NA	Married	Cohabiting with husband and their child	Apt. rental	University
6.	Tina	27	25	2	2 yrs	3 mths	Partnered	Cohabiting with partner and her child	Apt. rental	College
7.	Zoe	29	15	2	12 yrs	2.5 yrs	Married	Cohabiting with husband and her children	Homeowner	College
8.	Bianca	19	19	1	3 mths	NA	Partnered	Cohabiting with partner and their child	Subsidized housing	High School
9.	Raina	23	17	2	5 yrs	18 mths	Single	Living with parents and her children	Parents' home	University
10.	Michelle	29	17	2	11 yrs	1 yr	Dating	Living with mother and her children	Apt. rental	High school
11.	Jada	29	24	1	4 yrs	NA	Dating	Single mom (father has parental and child support)	Subsidized housing	High School
12.	Stacy	27	26	1	11 mths	NA	Married	Cohabiting with husband and their child	Apt. rental	University
13.	Nicky	24	22	1	2.5 yrs	NA	Partnered	Cohabiting with partner and their child	Apt. rental	College

No.	Participant pseudonym	Employment status	Employment sector	Current SES	Cultural background	Family of origin structure	Family of origin SES
1.	Lisa	Social Assistance	Not employed	Low SES	Jamaican (Jcan)-Canadian	Mother, siblings, CAS care	Public Assistance
2.	Kendra	Self-employed	Mass Communication	Low SES	Trinidadian (Tdian)-Canadian	Parents split age 2, extended family involved	Public Assistance
3.	Naja	Employed	Human Resource	Middle	Trinidadian-Canadian	Mother, older brother, grandfather	Middle class
4.	Jay	Employed & College student	Social Services	Low SES	Jamaican-Canadian	Mother, grandmother 2 siblings (sisters)	Public Assistance
5.	Shanti	Employed	Social Services	Low SES	Jamaican-Canadian	Single mother	Low SES then Middle class

6.	Tina	MAT Leave/College student	Retail	Low SES	Jcan/Tdian-Canadian	2 parents	Low SES then Middle class	
7.	Zoe	Employed	Employed	Business Management	Middle	Jcan/Tdian-Canadian	2 parents	Low SES then Middle class
8.	Bianca	University student	Not employed	Low SES	Jamaican-Canadian	Single mother	Public Asst. then Middle class	
9.	Raina	Employed & University student	Retail	Middle with parents support	Bajan/Guyanese	2 parents, 2 siblings (brothers)	Middle class	
10.	Michelle	Social Assistance	Not employed	Low SES	Trinidadian-Canadian	Divorced household, raised by grandparents	Low SES	
11.	Jada	Entrepreneur & College student	Student	Low SES	Jamaican-Ethiopian	Mother, siblings, extended family	Public Asst. then Middle class	
12.	Stacy	Self-employed	Graphic Arts	Middle	Grenadian-Canadian	2 parents, 2 sister	Middle class	
13.	Nicky	Self-employed	Events planning	Low SES	Jamaican-Canadian	Mother and father, mother-care-takers- grandparents- father + siblings; Grandparents	Low SES then Middle	

the story be told, not torn apart in analysis' (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 257). Our final phases of analysis used a decolonized version of Charmaz (2014) Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT), developed by Author A (Goddard-Durant, 2019) to be sensitive and responsive to how colonialist, neo-colonialist and neoliberalist ideologies might be playing out in the research process and participants' experiences. This enabled us to identify not only the specific and varied adversities and barriers faced by the participants, but also how these were structured by policies that reflect racist, gendered, colonialist, neoliberalist, and neocolonialist ideologies. We also used ATLAS.ti qualitative software to manage our research data and team-based analysis.

Findings

Our research produced several key findings that emphasized how anti-Black racism, gender, and social class gave rise to multiple intersecting adversities for young Black Caribbean-Canadian mothers throughout their lives, constraining their efforts to access resources and supports and to enact resilience in their everyday lives.

Experiences of a racist education system: '... what if you're a student like me?'

In this section, we present our findings which challenge the prevailing conceptualization of development as normal, universal and time-bound upon which the dominant conceptualization of resilience depends. The women in our study shared different stories about their experiences growing up as Black Caribbean-Canadian girls in Toronto, Ontario, during the first decade of the twenty-first century. When examined within their socio-economic and policy contexts, however, every story revealed how anti-Black racism shaped their living conditions and how adversity had always been an ordinary fixture of these women's everyday lives. Specifically, their stories of navigating a racist education system shed light on the struggles they would face as young mothers trying to provide for their children.

Eight participants spoke about being ignored by teachers, suspended, or expelled due to behaviours they used to cope with undiagnosed learning difficulties and violence in their homes, schools, communities, and from police. They relayed that they received little or no psychoeducational interventions or guidance on career options, or the steps needed to pursue a career – in short, none of the supports necessary to enable them to develop into confident adults able to independently support their families. Unsurprisingly, eight of the 13 mothers in our study initially dropped out of or disengaged from high school because of these racialized experiences, and only returned later in life to complete their schooling. This experience was typical for all the participants regardless of whether they attended schools in mainly White middle-class areas or predominantly Black working-class communities. The participants' stories align with and explain recent statistics about Black girls' poorer academic outcomes compared to their White peers; they were less likely than other women in the same cohort to have a postsecondary certificate, diploma, or degree in 2016 (Turcotte, 2020). This similarity in Black women's levels of educational achievement challenges the idea in resilience research that Black girls' development follows the same trajectory as their peers of other races who do not experience oppressive conditions within the educational

system that are grounded in their intersecting, socially ascribed racial and gender identities. Jada (a 29-year-old mother of one) discusses how it was only as an adult that she recognized the negative impacts that the lack of appropriate interventions and academic and career guidance had on her potential to move on to post-secondary education:

I did pretty much the bare minimum ... because everyone's telling me I have to finish school. There's no other direction that I'm getting except for "Finish school. Finish school." I'm not understanding the importance of getting a certain average [so] that when you finish high school you can actually get into university, and you don't have to go through what I ended up going through having to do all these transitional programs just to get to post-secondary education. Again, of course they have guidance counsellors but what if you're a student like me who had struggled their entire childhood and youth with school [due to ADHD and losing friends to gun violence]. Um, it was more so difficult for me not having someone to pat me on the back and say like "It's OK if you need help."

According to the young women, reporting these experiences to their parents yielded little benefit. All participants explained that their parents strongly emphasized the importance of pursuing an education, but this did not seem to translate into parents advocating for their children when anti-Black racism at school was negatively affecting their children's academic experiences. For example, Zoe shared that her parents' response to her and her sisters' reports of racist slurs from peers was to 'ignore them', 'don't let them block your progress'. That many of these parents were struggling to cope with systemic anti-Black racism themselves might account for their responses. Many Black persons who migrated from the Caribbean during the post-emancipation era and onwards were seeking to escape poverty created by colonization and neo-colonization (Walker, 1984). Walker (1984) notes that these immigrants were often incorporated into existing Black Canadian communities where they faced many of the same structural inequalities that existed in their home countries. The stories told by these young women and the disempowered responses of their parents are deeply entangled with these socio-cultural, public, and geo-political narratives. These racialized experiences of their parents, and its implications for their responses to their Black daughters' own reports of racism, challenges the implied notion foundational to the conceptualization of resilience that there is a singular, 'normal' developmental trajectory for all girls. The racialized daily lived experiences of these women as they grew into adults were markedly different from those of their White peers.

The futility of individualized strategies: barriers to economic independence

Unsurprisingly, experiencing anti-Black racism within the educational system while growing up was detrimental to our participants' future capacities as young mothers to financially provide for their families. With a high school level of education (or less) in the Canadian economy, they could only qualify for low-income jobs. However, their financial situation was exacerbated by the fact that in the Canadian workforce Black women make 59 cents for every dollar paid to their non-racialized male counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2016). Participants discussed how the adversities that came with being young Black girls within a racist education system set them up for continued financial difficulties, leaving many of them reluctantly reliant on state benefits to support their families. The young women described challenges with independently

meeting their families' economic needs – problems that were directly and indirectly rooted in racialization and the province of Ontario's gendered, xenophobic social structures and systems. We will illustrate how the systemic and structural nature of these difficulties challenge a key assumption of the prevailing conceptualization of resilience: that individuals can overcome adversities by managing their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours to prevent their difficulties from having any harmful effects on their daily and long-term lived experiences. Our participants' stories show the opposite; they demonstrate how, in spite of their best individualized efforts, systemic difficulties can be compounded over the lifetime of young Black Canadian mothers.

'... another form of toxic behavior': structural challenges to relying on supportive relationships

Much like Reynolds (2005, 2009), we found that the adversities young Black mothers encounter in provisioning for their families are partly due to paternal absenteeism: nine of the young Caribbean Canadian mothers in our study expressed that they were caring for their children with little to no help from their child's biological father. The participants explained how these men are caught up in unaddressed mental health issues stemming from racism, low education levels, drug use, and violence in families and communities. For example, Jay (a 22-year-old mother of one) describes her daughter's father in this way:

It was like alcohol abuse issues, his own mental health issues, like abuse from his mom that he's dealing with and it was like then he started to abuse me so it's like it just escalated to another—I guess another form of toxic behavior ...

Community-based programmes in Toronto offer evidence that Black youth struggling with racial trauma in their families and in their communities are often framed as delinquent within the educational system; this trauma typically remains undiagnosed in Black boys and men and can then lead to harsh punishment or incarceration (Black Health Alliance, 2016). Historically, the structural and systemic inequities young Black fathers face in the Caribbean and as first and second-generation immigrants have resulted in their frequent absences from family life; consequently, Caribbean women, including immigrants, are often the primary providers and caregivers for their families (Reynolds, 2005). The burden of financially provisioning for their children's needs was especially difficult for our participants who were sole parents. Their situation is all too common; in Canada, 65 percent of Black women who are single mothers experience family poverty compared to 26 percent of White single mothers (Katshunga et al., 2020).

Our young, second-generation Black Caribbean-Canadian participants were additionally burdened as parents because xenophobia, racism, and sexism prevented them from benefitting from the cultural tradition within Black communities of using grandmothers to assist with childcare (see Dow, 2019). The participants' mothers (those still alive and/or in contact with their daughters) were all employed full-time – they were still young enough to be a part of the workforce when their teenage daughters had children (Reynolds, 2005). Apart from this, however, most Black Caribbean-Canadian female immigrants experience disproportionately high levels of poverty (Statistics Canada, 2016); not working or reducing work to care for grandchildren is nearly impossible. Additionally, Black immigrants struggle to have their skills and degrees (earned in their home

countries) recognized and often work below their level of competency and qualification due to Canadian employers' racism and sexism (UNOHR, 2017). Our participants' mothers were, therefore, more likely to be employed in low paying jobs that often made them unavailable as a childcare resource.

'Your job's not within the hours [to qualify]': barriers created by family policies

The racialized, gendered, and social class aspects of women's experiences of securing early childcare services becomes clear when we consider that regulated childcare in Canada suffers from a lack of available and affordable childcare spaces. Toronto has the highest childcare fees in Canada (for infant and toddler care, \$1,900 and \$1,557 per month, respectively) and high childcare fees are a leading cause of parental decisions to stop using childcare services (Macdonald & Friendly, 2021). There are government subsidies to offset childcare expenses, but as our participants noted, they are difficult to qualify for and do not fully cover childcare costs. At 10.5 percent, twice that of their White female or White male peers, Black women have one of the highest rates of working poverty in Canada (Stapleton, 2019) and are more likely to require subsidies to afford childcare. Additionally, Black, Indigenous, and other racialized populations more often live in communities with 'childcare deserts' (i.e. communities where there are at least three children for every licensed childcare space) (Prentice & White, 2019). As Stacy (27-year-old mother of one) indicated in a focus group:

Even being on subsidy, it's still a long time. By the time I was like maybe two months out from going back to work, we actually had our space confirmed. And then like a week before we went in to confirm everything with the subsidy office, we found out that our space was no longer confirmed. Because like, they had taken other kids. And it was very stressful.

Moreover, according to the participants, when they tried to work or complete post-secondary education to secure jobs that would improve their financial independence, they encountered childcare accessibility barriers. As expected, these challenges were worse for those nine participants contending with absentee fathers. Whereas some participants were able to find post-secondary education programmes that offered daycare, this was not the norm, and for those who were working, care providers' hours of operation did not align with their working hours. As Jada (a 29-year-old mother of one) explains:

Even when I finished maternity leave, the type of work that I was basically qualified to do did not necessarily happen within the hours of 07:00 and 18:00. So even if I went back to that job, who's watching my kid? I was trying to express this to the case worker "Well, can I at least get daycare so I can sleep during the day? Like you guys just want me to be at home." She said - "No, there's nothing we can do, your job's not within the hours [to qualify]." And I'm like "So how does that make any sense? There's not only jobs that are within the hours of 07:00 to 18:00. Every daycare closes at 18:00."

Only four women in our study received paid maternity and parental benefits. This is not surprising given that approximately 30 percent of all mothers in Canada (outside of the province of Québec, which has its own parental leave system) and 60 percent of low-income mothers in Canada do not receive these benefits (McKay et al, 2016). Although there is no race-disaggregated data on access to Canadian parental benefits, one can infer from recent statistics on the racialized groups' low access to employment insurance benefits (and Canada's national Employment Insurance programme is the wider

legislative home of maternity and parental benefits) that racialized populations also face systemic exclusions from parental benefits (Hou et al., 2020). Securing child-care was thus crucial for these young Black mothers as they had to work from very early on in their children's lives.

'The OSAP was accumulating': the weight of student loan policies

Nine of the young women reported that they had to take on OSAP debt to finance their post-secondary education as part of their goals to achieve economic independence for their families. Although this loan made post-secondary education possible for them, the repayment rates, when considered within the intersectional contexts of their earning potential and expenditures as young Black mothers, perpetuate inequities. With little or no help from their children's fathers, the low income of these young mothers would have to cover a loan repayment as well as food, shelter, and everyday expenses for the whole family. Unfortunately, this meant that many of the participants struggled to pursue higher education and those who attempted to juggle work, school, and mothering, with the stress of OSAP debt hanging over their heads, often found this balancing act unsustainable. Naja (a 29-year-old mother of two) expressed the worry this caused, saying:

I have not finished the degree. Don't know if I ever will. I only lasted, I think, one semester. The OSAP was accumulating. I had gotten a better job, in my field.

I wasn't seeing the immediate benefit of that sacrifice. Because it became a lot. It was extremely overwhelming. Working full time, having the two kids by myself, going to school two days a week. When you're not at school physically you're doing the assignments. It was extremely too much. And then the travel time, it was just ...

it was exhausting. So, I just dropped out and I haven't gone back since.

Consequently, whereas loans to finance post-secondary education could, for some, be a solution to financial barriers, for these women, the programme created additional stress because the loan repayment requirements did not account for the interlocking systemic barriers they faced in other areas of their lives due to their intersecting identities.

'... no one talks about self-reliance': the trap of social welfare policies

Given all the interconnected and relentless roadblocks they encountered in trying to independently provide for their families, it is not surprising that these young Black mothers – particularly those who were the sole provider for their families, were forced to rely on welfare (which, in the province of Ontario is called the Ontario Works [OW] programme) for some time (9 /13 participants). These women further shared that their financial challenges were not alleviated by applying for OW, as their subsidy amounts were barely enough to support their families. They also explained that it was difficult to permanently transition off OW because even if they did secure a job, OW's low-income threshold means that the meager wages they earned rendered them ineligible to continue to receive OW. They went as far as to propose that in its current design and mode of implementation, OW and other assistance programmes kept them reliant on government subsidies. In a focus group, Zoe (a 29-year-old mother of two) explained:

I think, in all these programs that I've been to, no one talks about self-reliance.

You go on to Ontario Works and it's like you're in a cycle— yes, they give you the workshops to get a job, but then it's hard because on subsidy there's only certain daycares you can choose and maybe in your area you don't like those daycares. So, it's like you're in that cycle of — what are you going to do? If you're on OW you can't make a certain amount of money. It was crazy. It's the resources we need to build self-reliance [that are lacking].

From 2013 to 2018, only 10–15 percent of persons receiving OW found employment and left the programme, which gives credence to our participants' concerns that the current system reinforces intersectional inequalities of race, gender, and class. Indeed, a recent report found that OW lacked the structures needed to help recipients overcome significant barriers to employment and it did not measure secure employment and self-reliance outcomes (Office of the Auditor General, 2018).

Discussion

Working with a reconfigured feminist and intersectional concept of resilience, our research aimed to understand experiences of young Black Caribbean-Canadian motherhood in Canada's largest urban centre, Toronto. Although our small sample size may be viewed as a limitation in the study, we argue that the Black feminist, intersectional, decolonizing, epistemological framework that guided our research, the mainly Black research team drawn from community and university contexts, and broader considerations from qualitative and relational interpretive research (see Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) mean that rather than seeking replicability or generalizability, our research emphasizes the importance of the 'trustworthiness of researcher claims vis-à-vis the knowledge presented' (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 149).

Our findings highlight the cumulative intersectional impacts of racialized, gendered, xenophobic, and classed experiences, contexts, and policies for young Black mothers in Canada. Similar to research on Black American and Black Caribbean-British women, engaging in paid employment to support one's family is culturally indicative of good mothering (Dow, 2019; Reynolds, 2005). Indeed, our participants were particularly concerned about lending credence to the 'Welfare Queen' stereotype, which they described as pervasive. The young women described challenges with independently meeting their families' economic needs – problems that were directly and indirectly rooted in racialization and the province of Ontario's gendered social structures and systems. Their stories illustrate the systemic roots of the challenges they faced when attempting to rely on their community for support: a strategy elevated in resilience research with young Black mothers. The mothers in our study also described how their ability to take on paid work was thwarted by the high cost and lack of childcare services. They described how the goal of completing post-secondary studies to improve their capacity to support their families was further sabotaged by the limitations of the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP student loans). Thus, when they were unable to secure employment to afford tuition or daycare, they reluctantly resorted to seeking help from provincial social assistance programmes, specifically Ontario Works (OW), and thus inadvertently found themselves in a system that seemed designed to reinforce the Welfare Queen stereotype.

Our findings lead to four research implications. First, we challenge the conceptualization of *normal development* privileged in resilience research. Our findings illustrate that

racialized childhood experiences both produce and aggravate the racialized and gendered difficulties young Black mothers face in trying to independently provide for their children. These findings debunk the prevailing assumption in resilience research that *normal development* for Black girls is characterized by educational and financial outcomes that facilitate their independence from others and from the state (see Barto et al., 2015; Weed et al., 2000). We found, instead, that the lives of Black Caribbean-Canadian girls living in the GTA are characterized by challenging contextual, relational, educational, employment, and parenting experiences, both daily and over the life course.

Second, and relatedly, we call attention to the problematic tendency in some resilience research with young Black mothers to examine a woman's life at a single point in time associated with a particular developmental outcome assumed to be indicative of normal development for that age (see Mukuna & Aloka, 2021; Solivan et al., 2015). What is needed is a radically reconfigured concept of time that recognizes how the past exists within the present. Unlike a progressive, chronological construction of time, Michelle Wright's (2015) epistemological concept of 'Epiphenomenal time' provides a useful relational and non-linear approach to understanding Black identities and experiences. Drawing from the legacies of trans-Atlantic slavery and European colonialism, Wright maintains that time 'comprises only the 'now' – but a 'now' that encompasses what is typically labeled the past and the future' (Wright, 2015, p. 41). The ongoing difficulties faced by young Black women have cumulative impacts and, hence, their developmental milestones are different and differently timed than those of their White counterparts. Our findings illustrate how due to these lifelong, interconnected structural and systemic barriers, some young Black mothers are pushed into a cycle of forced reliance on social welfare. A feminist intersectional concept of resilience can provide insights into other ways that young Black mothers' resilience can be supported to interrupt this cycle.

Third, our findings demonstrate that the adversities young Black Caribbean-Canadian women encounter in trying to care and provide for their families are rooted in the unique, real world structural and systemic ways that race, ethnicity, class, and gender intersect across their lives through experiences of migration; legacies of colonialism; inequalities in education, paid work, social assistance, and access to childcare; and the oppressive constraints on young Black men to be providers or caregivers, for example. Although research shows that individual abilities (such as motivation or goal setting) and efforts (such as resource usage) to overcome adversities facilitate resilience (see Kennedy & Bennett, 2006; Malindi, 2018), we argue that the racialized and gendered nature of the adversities young Black women encounter and the resources that are available to them ultimately render their individual efforts less effective. The concept of resilience must, therefore, be re-configured to account for intersectional identities and social and structural contexts. By considering how these barriers caused by anti-Black racism and gender-inequality and classism work in the lives of young Black mothers, resilience research can also actively provide empirically based enhancements to specific socio-economic policies that shape these young women's daily lives. Such enhancements would facilitate reduction of systemic and structural barriers that cause adversity or constrain access to resources, thereby increasing the effectiveness of the individual capacities of young Black mothers to provide for their families independently.

The fourth implication arising from this research relates to theory, methodology, and epistemology. Moving beyond individualized and Eurocentric liberal assumptions about

human development in resilience research and towards a more intersectional and feminist approach, we highlight how methodological and epistemological linkages are foundational to any attempt to reconfigure the dominant conception of resilience. Our project used qualitative narrative data collection and data analysis methods informed by several traditions of narrative and feminist methodologies. Especially influential were Hill Collins (2009, pp. 257–265). Black feminist epistemological tenets: the importance of ‘lived experience as a criterion of meaning’, ‘the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims’, ‘the ethics of caring’, and ‘the ethic of personal accountability’. Recognizing that all stories are heard through our conceptual narratives, we listened to and analyzed the stories that women told with and through theories of resilience, intersectionality, colonization, and Epiphenomenal time, with a focus on the policy and socio-economic contexts of Black motherhood in Canada. Our aim of understanding the systemic and structural barriers experienced by low SES young Black Caribbean-Canadian mothers required listening to our participants’ experiences over their lifetimes and working with trusted community partners who can utilize our findings to shape contextually appropriate interventions.

Conclusion

Our paper, rooted in a qualitative and community-based study of young Black Caribbean-Canadian motherhood in Canada’s largest urban setting, interrogates how barriers caused by anti-Black racism, gender inequalities, xenophobia, and classism operate in the lives of young Black mothers. We argue that any focus on resilience must attend to the specific historical and ongoing socio-economic contexts that shape these young women’s daily realities and that such an approach could help weaken the systemic and structural barriers that cause adversity for these mothers and constrain their access to resources; moreover, most of the mothers (9/13) were parenting without the financial or parenting supports of the father of their children, a situation that was partly rooted in wider systems of racial trauma, and structural and systemic inequalities for both Black women and Black men. Our findings highlight that navigating racism in education is a central element in young Black Caribbean-Canadian women’s development and has long-term financial effects; individualized coping strategies as young mothers are largely futile against a backdrop of racialized, gendered, xenophobic, and classed family, educational, and social welfare policies.

Resilience research seeks to transform the lives of individuals – to help them function optimally and flourish. Acknowledging how intersectional inequalities play out continuously and cumulatively in young Black mothers’ lives, ultimately limiting their capacities to provision for their families, will enhance the work of resilience researchers by better positioning them to both understand the lives of young Black mothers and to develop effective interventions that support them, their families, and communities.

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