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Obasi, Chijioke

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Black social workers: Identity, racism, invisibility/hypervisibility at work

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Chijioke Obasi 

University of the West of Scotland, Paisley, Scotland

Abstract

- *Summary:* This article provides a reflexive account of qualitative research with Black female social workers in the North of England. It uses ‘Africanist Sista-hood in Britain’ as the theoretical framework guiding the research. The data are gathered from six semi-structured interviews and two focus groups. Data were analysed via thematic analysis. Participant data are used to discuss issues of identity, race and racism as they contribute to positions of visibility, invisibility and hypervisibility within the social work spaces discussed. The article challenges Western forms of knowledge production as the dominant discourse in social work research, practice, education and training and links this to wider issues of power, privilege and suppression of marginalised voices.
- *Findings:* The findings section reveals examples of racism, marginality, invisibility and hypervisibility as part of the lived experiences of Black female social workers in the study. It includes discussions of ‘collective strategic projection’ as a consequence of the development of the ‘race taboo’ often present in these work environments.
- *Applications:* The article calls for social work educators, practitioners and the wider academic field to do more to centralise anti-racist approaches in an attempt to challenge racism in social work.

Keywords

Social work, black perspectives, racism, feminism, anti-oppressive practice, social work education

Corresponding author:

Chijioke Obasi, School of Education and Social Sciences, University of the West of Scotland, Paisley PA1 2BE, Scotland.

Email: chijiokeobasi@blueyonder.co.uk

Introduction

Charlotte Williams in her discussions of the current state of race and ethnicity in social work research, starts her article with the following statement:

The need for sustained scholarly analysis and knowledge building on issues of race/ethnicity (R/E) in social work research is as compelling as ever given the intensification of global racial inequalities, issues associated with the ‘migrant crisis’, the spread of populist racialised political discourse and the ongoing downward pressure of neo-liberal imperatives. (Williams, 2020, p. 1058)

Williams goes on to highlight the invisibilisation of race and ethnicity in public policy and calls for a redux in social work research. In this article I aim to make further contribution to that much needed redux, not just in social work research, but also in social work education, practice and management. It is an attempt to stimulate debate and encourage all those involved in every area of the social work profession to take stock and consider the current state of race and racism in social work. It is a call for us all to work collectively to create a profession that is truly reflective of the anti-racist, anti-oppressive values it espouses. If not now, then when?

This article makes use of participant data to discuss issues of identity, race and racism as experienced by Black female social workers in the North of England. It does so by using the narratives of research participants to reflect on experiences in social work as they discuss identity interchanges with service users, carers, colleagues as well as at organisational level, while carrying out their professional roles.

The author takes a reflexive approach to discussions of epistemology, methodology and method to locate the researcher within the research. There is recognition that the reconstruction of knowledge from a Black perspective involves tapping into Black experiences and allowing Black voices to be heard as legitimate sources for the production of knowledge (Aymer, 2009). The article draws together key concepts in Africanist Sista-hood in Britain (Obasi, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2021) born out in participant narratives. It discusses issue of invisibility, hypervisibility, Whiteness and privilege and concludes by calling for further contributions to progress anti-racist approaches across the social work profession.

Background

The article originates from a study which focuses on experiences and perspectives of workplace equality and diversity as described by Black women and cultural Deaf women. In previous articles (Obasi, 2014, 2017), I have discussed these issues as they relate to both Black women and Deaf women but this current article focuses on Black experiences. In the wider research there were 30 participants in total, and of those, six were Black female social workers, all working in the North

of England, and they form the focus of this article. Although the wider research spanned a variety of UK public sector organisations including education, health, civil service, social work and social care, the participant focus of this article relates to Black women's experiences working in professional social work roles.

Contextualising the research

Epistemology is a good starting point to contextualise any qualitative research. As a Black female researcher, I have an acute awareness that Western patriarchal systems of knowledge production dominate the research field. Positivist approaches to knowledge production typify these structures of power. White male systems of power sustain and reproduce White male agendas. Feminist thinking on knowledge production has challenged the ways in which the natural sciences have been held up as the ideal against which other research is measured and found wanting (Acker et al., 1983; Collins, 2000; Karenga & Tembo, 2012). Western Feminist frameworks have been criticised for the history of racism and exclusion of Black women too (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Hudson-Weems, 2000; Karenga & Tembo, 2012). If epistemology is to be understood within the context of its influence in research, then it is important to use it to consider not just what we think we know but also how and why we claim to know it (Collins, 2000). It is important to both acknowledge and investigate knowledge and its source of power and to recognise the structures that erect, maintain and reproduce that knowledge. The privilege of Whiteness and maleness has an enduring influence on the systems that maintain their power and simultaneously work to subjugate and invalidate the knowledge production processes of Black women.

My approach to theory construction in the research was influenced not just by what was visible, foregrounded and readily promoted but also by what was invisible, suppressed and censored. For research about women by a woman, feminism seems to be the direction in which most female researchers are pointed. However, all epistemological positionings are linked to history whether or not this is acknowledged. Feminism has a deep-rooted history of racism; it is not one that is recognised widely enough beyond the realms of Black feminism. Both within and outside feminist discourses many have declared their dissatisfaction with the legacy that the history and terminology still leave. hooks (1984) starts her book by acknowledging that many Black women have expressed their dissatisfaction with the association with feminism, not least because of its history as a White, middle class movement which worked to exclude Black women. Black feminists themselves have recognised the limitations of the terminology of feminism (Collins, 1996; hooks, 1984). Jain and Turner (2012) also write about the way in which they and many other 'non-white' women actively disassociate themselves with feminism in any form. For Jain she was 'struck by how limiting feminism was and could not ignore its contentious past with racism' (Jain & Turner, 2012, p. 68). Ebunoluwa (2009) in her search for an African variant talks of the embarrassment some Africans have in associating themselves as feminists. Whilst recognising that

it is important to acknowledge its progress in challenging patriarchy, racism complicates feminism for many Black women.

Springer (2002) highlights the work of a number of young Black female artists whose lyrics in songs have gone some way to challenge racism and sexism while also valorising Black womanhood. Springer also recognises the tendency for such artists to disavow the feminist label but at the same time she claims their work espouses feminist principles. There in lays the bind. Black women's struggle and the principles they operated under pre-date feminist frameworks and terminology. When Black women were fighting the racism that was excluding them from the feminist movement, their knowledge and contributions were not recognised as feminist then, so how is it, that even in the face of their disavowal their contributions can be automatically claimed as in any way feminist?

It is both the terminology, framing and racist history of feminism that led me to reject this as a framework for my research. As a Black woman I have benefitted hugely from the scholarship and intellectual contributions of other Black women including those who subscribe to or have had their contribution appropriated by feminism. In moving to a framework outside feminist framing and terminology, Africanist Sista-hood aims to build on the existing contributions of our Sistās and (an)Sistās.

Patricia Hill Collins in her work on Black feminist thought uses a perfect analogy to highlight the inherent bias in knowledge construction:

A small girl and her mother passed a statue depicting a European man who had bare-handedly subdued a ferocious lion. The little girl stopped, looked puzzled and asked, "mama something's wrong with that statue. Everybody knows that a man can't whip a lion" But darling" her mother replied, "you must remember that the man made the statue - As told by Katie G Cannon. (Collins, 2000, p. 251)

It is an analogy that lays bare the bias of history and the attempts to deceive in the way history is portrayed and distorted. Its power and resonance could not be more significant within the current climate following the murder of George Floyd. The toppling of the Edward Colston statue has further ignited calls for widespread dismantling not just of the statues but the implicit and explicit distortions and biases they contain. It has led to many difficult conversations, changes in nomenclature, practices and procedures, and it has created opportunities to re-think, re-address and acknowledge our histories and recognise the many different ways White society has benefitted from structures built on racist oppression of Black people. There are difficult conversations that need to be had among feminists too. For many Black women the word feminism carries a legacy of exclusion, invalidation and oppression of our (an)Sistās. The theoretical framework guiding my own research was that of 'Africanist Sista-hood in Britain'.

Africanist Sista-hood in Britain

Chilisa and Ntseane (2010) provide particular critique of Western feminist knowledge production and urge researchers to see beyond the cage that restricts our

creativity. They recognise the way that marginalised groups are often invisibilised by history, language and terminology that excludes them. This highlights the issue of the importance of self-naming central to the framework that guides this research. In turning to a framework of ‘Africanist-Sista-hood in Britain’, it seeks to offer original terminology and framing. In the edited publication discussing Black womanhood (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019), I write in detail about the framework, its origins, key concepts and relevance to wider debates. Within this article I have provided a brief overview in terms of the component parts.

The term “**Africanist**” similar to Afrocentric principles, adopts a Pan African perspective in seeking to make diasporic ties. In this way it makes connections to our (an)Sista-ral or direct heritage in Africa. Like Morrison (1993), there is also recognition of both a geographical and ideological notion of Africa.

“**Sista**” captures the centrality of Black womanhood and the importance of lived experience. To be a “Sista” is different from being a “sister” as within the term Sista is an implied recognition of a positive association with Black womanhood,

The “**-hood**” component of the term is about collectivity and connectivity. Written into the terminology then is a visual representation of the points at which we both connect and diverge. This makes intersectionality central to the framework. A hyphenated *Sista-hood* rather than *Sistahood* has built in recognition of the points of difference and diversity as well as our historical connections; it has recognition of the hyphenated space (Brueggemann, 2009), and those who inhabit it.

It is a discourse “**in Britain**” rather than one centred around British identity and the boundaries this can create. It offers space for recognition of diversity in epistemological and ontological geographies that exist side by side. It is inclusive of Africanist women living their life in Britain including those who are either not legally British citizens, or do not wish to readily showcase that aspect of their identity (Obasi, 2019).

Reflexivity in research

Reflexivity in research has become more widely expected as an essential part of any qualitative research endeavour (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020). Probst and Berenson (2014) go as far as to refer to reflexivity as the hallmark of qualitative research. However, in discussing reflexivity, more attention needs to be paid to its inextricable relationship with epistemology. To be reflexive, not only contributes to producing knowledge that aids in understanding and gaining insight into the workings of our social world, but also provides insight on how this knowledge is produced (Pillow, 2003). Lazard and McAvoy, (2020) talk about a ‘reflexive turn’ in social sciences, and this can also be seen as part of the wider ‘interpretive turn’ discussed by Pillow (2003). While positivist, ‘objective’, male-dominated natural sciences still remain the very visible hand of power and validation in the wider research field, reflexive researchers need to continue to problematise and make inroads that

nudge and pressure these structures of power. Williams (2020) highlights the need for critical reflexivity among social work researchers in an attempt to move issue of race and ethnicity in social work away from their current position of marginality.

Methodology and methods

Collins (2000) provides a useful definition of methodology:

methodology refers to the broad principles of how to conduct research and how interpretive paradigms are to be applied. The level of epistemology is important because it determines which questions merit investigation, which interpretive frameworks will be used to analyse findings, and to what use any ensuing knowledge will be put. (Collins, 2000, p. 252)

In keeping with the framework and methodology, qualitative approaches to data collection were used. Woodley and Lockard (2016) outline qualitative research methodology as particularly beneficial as tools for researching lived experiences of Black women. Loosely structured followed by semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. Given the framework of 'Africanist Sista-hood in Britain' and its recognition of both collective and individual experiences of Black women, focus groups were also held to provide the opportunity for collective as well as individual responses. Woodley and Lockard's (2016) aim to create a 'theoretical and methodological space for traditionally silenced and marginalised groups to critique social institutions that perpetuate inequality' (p. 322) is an aim I shared in my research too.

Data collection

Sampling

Participants in the research were recruited via snowball sampling. Snowball sampling has much to offer the field for those underrepresented in research. It offers opportunities for participants to extend their impact on the research beyond their own individual participation (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Browne, 2005). Snowball sampling also acts as a source of internal validation from within the participant group as by recommending other participants this can be seen as a source of approval of the research and potentially also the researcher (Browne, 2005). In addition, snowball sampling provides the opportunity for researchers to access cultural knowledge from within the context it is created (Woodley & Lockard, 2016).

Snowball sampling is often associated with 'hard-to-reach' or 'hidden' populations. Both those terms 'hard to reach' and 'hidden' understate participant relationship to the structural forces of power within the research field. The voices of Black women have been subjugated as researchers, as research participants, as social work practitioners and users of services. Research with Black women has

a history, and previous experiences of discrimination and exploitation in the field may well contribute to the reluctance of participants to come forward without the protective screening provided in snowball sampling. Williams (2020) points out the issue of relationship building and trust when working with race and ethnicity in research and the fear of some minority participants that they may be subject to increased surveillance if they raise concerns. Terminology that talks of those who are 'seldom heard' in research places at least some onus on the research field to acknowledge how this position has occurred.

This is not to say that snowball sampling is without its critics, and the very many limitations are well rehearsed in the literature (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). Issues of validity, representativeness, gatekeeper bias and lack of repeatability are all points that have been highlighted within the field. It then falls on researchers to make that decision as to whether these limitations are 'a price that needs to be paid' (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997) which are offset by the very many advantages that this method offers.

A Black woman interviewing other Black women

Issues of 'sameness' and 'difference' are now an established part of the discussion of reflexivity in research. Binary positions of either insider or outsider positionings have given way to much more fluid and nuanced understandings of the position that researchers hold (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017; Obasi, 2014) or relative positions including notions of relatively insider or outsider (Merriam et al., 2001). As a Black female researcher who is also a qualified social worker, before I entered each interview, I was aware there would be some level of commonality in terms of race, gender and professional training. However, as Johnson-Bailey (1999) points out, 'the interviewing phase in qualitative research is dynamic and ever changing. No two situations or circumstances are ever alike' (p. 668). Difference or outsidership could strike from any angle, for example in relation to class, motherhood, race consciousness, religion, sexuality and not forgetting the different ways in which each of these identities were experienced. Linking to the theoretical framework and the central focus of intersectionality helped navigate these shifting positions as they arose both in interviews and focus groups.

Data analysis

Data were analysed via thematic analysis. It is recognised that within qualitative research the researcher also has significant impact on the analysis of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher has decisions to make about whether to transcribe or work straight from raw data, to pay a transcriber or transcribe oneself, decisions about whether to use manual or electronic data analysis and in the absence of a one size fits all handy guide book, researchers might turn again to their epistemology to help them decide. In my own case I transcribed the data myself and conducted manual thematic analysis. Some consideration was given to computer aided

data analysis but I felt the greater level of intimacy gained from manual analysis is what I valued more. Braun and Clarke (2006) also identify familiarity with the data as an essential first step in thematic analysis.

Analysis of this section of the data required a revisit to the transcriptions, but viewed through the lens of professional social work. This involved identification of common themes as they emerged, and much of this related to identity. It explores the interplay between their personal and professional identity as Black women and how this played out in relation to external responses to that identity.

Findings

My aim in presenting these findings is not to offer any broad generalisations but rather to offer contextual understanding instead of universal laws (Willis et al., 2007). Five of the participants were practicing social workers and one was an academic who had only recently left practice and referred to social work experiences for the vast majority of her interview. Two were aged 36–45 and four were aged 46–55. Three were also dual qualified and had a nursing qualification as well as a social work qualification. One was a social work manager; all other participants were on a social work grade. All participants gave written consent by way of a signed consent form. All participants have been given pseudonyms in order to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. Anonymised quotes are used as exemplars for the points being made.

Gail Lewis (1996) in her research, found an ‘overall harmony of voices’ which revealed what she describes as a unitary Black women’s experience in professional social work, but in my own research, in terms of the articulation of their overall experiences the picture was more mixed. There were two participants who were very clear that they did not feel that they had been treated less favourably than their colleagues at any stage of their career, as discussed by ‘Tandie’, ‘I know there are some people who have experienced bad attitude from different people from different backgrounds, but I can actually put my hand up and say I have NEVER experienced anything like that’ (Tandie – Social Worker)

The rest of the participant narratives then varied from those who felt that racism had led to them leaving their organisation/profession and those who had experienced different microaggressions or ‘chronic racial insults’ (Obasi, 2014) with less extreme impacts on their working lives. All the social workers practiced or had practiced in the North of England. Feelings of isolation hypervisibility and invisibility came through in different ways. Where Black social workers talked about their isolating experience of being the only Black member of the team there was also an added frustration about the missed opportunities from colleagues to be more sensitive and empathetic to their situation. This point is made well in strikingly similar ways by the two participants below. ‘Mabel’ stated:

Occasionally when someone will be the only person, the only White person in a group, they came back and say “oh my goodness you know I just been to this particular

group and I'm the only White person in the group, and I feel really isolated, I feel really this" ... and the whole team will be like "Oh did you?" And you know and I'm thinking I'm living this every day and I'm supposed to accept it as a way of life but when YOU! Once the shoe is on the other foot, it's a big thing! (Mabel – Social Worker)

'Susan' had stated that throughout her career she had always been the only Black person in her team and had just become accustomed to it. She was also one of the participants who felt that she had never been treated in any way less favourably than her White colleagues, but she still had this to say:

Just sometimes when people go on about things and say, not so much at work like when people go abroad and they'll say "gosh you know I was the only White person there!" or if they've been invited to an Asian wedding or something like that and I'll say "welcome to my world that is me every day that is!" (Susan – Social Worker)

'Mabel' also goes on to reflect further on this point.

...and even when you have that experience you don't think ooh gosh well how's Mabel feeling then? Nobody ever think about it in this way. Nobody think about the isolation and at least they can come back to the team and say I did this, and I felt this way. (Mabel – Social Worker)

Lewis (1996, 2000) discusses similar issues of visibility and invisibility that arose from participant narratives within her research. She goes on to highlight the invisibility of Black people to White people while also making comparison of the visibility of White people to Black people. In their discussions of invisibility and hypervisibility in the workplace, Buchanan and Settles (2019) set out their understanding of the key concepts they are working within. Hypervisibility is not just about being highly visible when it comes to marginalised groups but is also associated with negative stereotypes which combine with being marked as different and perceived as being deviant and therefore the subject of increased surveillance. Invisibility too has negative consequences for marginalised social groups. Invisibility refers to those who are not fully recognised or valued, organisational norms within the workplace are normally those of the dominant group. Representations of those invisibilised individuals are largely absent or stereotyped. Finally, a visible individual has control over their own visibility and are perceived in a way they desire, they are valued and acknowledged for the work that they do (Buchanan & Settles, 2019).

In a previous article I have written about the way Black professionals have to manage both hypervisibility and invisibility as part of their working lives (Obasi, 2013) and within this current research there is evidence that this applies to social work too. These social work institutions or 'White welfare organisation' discussed by Aymer (2009) are places where Whiteness is normalised. If the White status quo

feels threatened, then Whiteness can be discussed within the safe environment of Whiteness. The transitory and exceptional experiences of White people are valorised over the permanent state of racial isolation of Black people which remains overlooked, unremarkable and unacknowledged. Cathy Aymer's work on Black professionals working in White organisations highlights the fact that issues of identity, trust and power can have a profound impact on the psychological development of these Black professionals. These impacts stretch to Black and minority ethnic service users too. Williams (2020) also highlights the dangers of being blinded by Whiteness in relation to policy making; she states 'in the absence of addressing the representation of ethnic minority communities and individuals, studies propose evidence-based interventions that may only apply to majority White communities and this serves to deny or obscure the needs of those less policy visible' (p. 1060). This has direct application to evidence based social work practice when it has been constructed in the same manner.

'Susan' again:

And another thing people do, you can hear them like they'll be on the phone "yeah Susan will come" and they'll say "who's Susan?" and they'll say "oh she works in our team, really jolly laughs a lot" and it's like almost like people think its offensive to say "she's Black" if they said "she's Black" they'd say ... "Yeah" (*in recognition*) because who else do they know on the team that's *Black*? *But they don't, it's like people think they daren't mention my colour and what's sometimes is even more offensive is when they say "I don't see your colour."*

This 'colour bind' or colour-evasive (Williams, 2020) approach espoused by many institutions and individuals is not as benign as it is often presented to be. It is problematic and dangerous. To invisibilise blackness normalises Whiteness. It removes aspects of our identity as a legitimate source of discussion. It creates an environment where race and racism are taboo subjects. Gloria Gordon describes 'the race taboo' as:

The shutting down of any attempts to discuss race as an issue ... it creates extreme anxiety in any individual who touches the subject. This enables race as a social distance boundary line drawing to continue its work silently at the invisible level. (Gordon, 2007, p. 91)

In these environments when Black people do discuss issues of racism, the accusation is laid back on them in the form of 'the proverbial chip on the shoulder' (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). The notion of '*collective strategic projection*' (Obasi, 2013) provides further analysis. 'Collective strategic projection' is a tool used against Black and minority ethnic people to deter them from bringing up the issue of race for discussion in normal conversation. It is used to avoid or obfuscate issues of race or racism. The collective element comes from the commonly held position in White British society that race is a taboo subject. The actions are

strategic because the long-term goal is that discussions of race or racism are to be avoided. The inadequacies or fears around such discussions are camouflaged in a shield of projection directed back onto the Black person concerned. Gunaratnam and Lewis (2001) draw on the work of Audre Lorde and her discussions of fear and anger in action, to make a similar point that fear and unexpressed anger can be the stuff of deflection and projection. This is done by using commonly understood terms like ‘chip on the shoulder’, ‘over sensitive’ and not forgetting the handy little ‘race card’ that hold politically loaded meanings reserved for Black or other minority group members (Obasi, 2013). An alternative but also damaging response is silence as discussed by ‘Mabel’:

You can go and have a really bad day, a bad visit, something happens, you come back to the office offload and talk about it and that’s it (*its finished with*); when it’s racism, you come back to the office, offload, talk about it, everyone’s quiet and nobody wants to know, they embarrassed just this word “race” and there is this embarrassment . . . as I say as a Black person in the team, if you start talking about race, people always worried about being identified as being racist, so they don’t converse with you . . .

The issue of progression for Black female social workers (and lack of it) provided a mixed picture. There were instances of blatant racism that had stifled progression, but this was also accompanied by personal choice not to apply. In one case this was a clear work–life balance choice and in another (‘Mandy’, the only first line manager) this was articulated as resistance (or (re)Sista-nce) against expectations of invisibilising Black identity:

I am not climbing any higher because they expect me to shed and I said it in front of the Chief Exec, if you want me to shed any blackness I’d rather just stay where I am and say what I want to say from here because in some ways I am safer here so it’s a choice. (Mandy – Social Work Manager)

Buchanan and Settles (2019) highlight invisibility and hypervisibility as destructive factors that have a negative impact on minority staff. They see it as an attack on ‘credibility, self-definition and authenticity which may also have a detrimental impact on well-being, commitment, organisational outcomes and feelings of belonging at work. Being made invisible or hypervisible is something done by dominant group members and supported by social structures’ (p. 1).

Black social workers within this research were working within the organisational norms of the dominant group which often worked to further invisibilise them or add to their hypervisibility. With both invisibility and hypervisibility comes increased surveillance. If ‘social work practice is, at its core, a relationship of trust between the practitioner and the client or service user’ (Aymer, 2009, p. 443), then this also needs to be extended to both implicit and explicit relationships of trust between the social worker and the organisation they work in. With the social workers within the study there were examples shared that showed how

this trust was sometimes undermined. There were examples being given of high levels of surveillance in the form of micro-management, another gave examples of a lack of support or direction to their work while still under surveillance and another spoke of the lower expectations in terms of her ability to do the job.

In addition to these issues that were discussed in relation to interchanges with colleagues, participants also discussed similar interchanges in relation to service users. Crenshaw (1989) in her much quoted work on intersectionality uses the American legal, political and theoretical position of Black women to demonstrate the ways in which Black women are often marginalised within these spheres. For Crenshaw there is a need to acknowledge the validity of creating a space for recognition of Black women that reflects the diversity of our experiences.

Within the research 'Effi' reflecting on her position as a Black female carrying out the social work role, provided a good illustration of how these systems of oppression can work together:

I made a complaint a foster carer, a foster carer's husband who was making sort of sexual advances to me and I didn't feel that the managers were supporting me appropriately with that. I spoke to my first year practice teacher who was a Black woman and she was saying you know sometimes there's White people who sort of feel that as a Black woman you're supposed to take that. (Effi – Social Worker)

The participant then went on to describe how further discussions with a Black professional colleague outside of work, raised her consciousness about how this was impacting on her not just as a Black person or as a woman but also specifically as a Black woman. The particularities of how Black women are sexualised also formed part of one of the focus group discussions including another participant who was not a social worker sharing her experience that: 'There was one particular patient he used to well, wank I suppose when I came on duty because he used to say "Black women are made for it"' (Focus group 2).

This brings us back to the framework of Africanist Sista-hood which highlights the way Black women and White women have different histories even in the ways we are objectified. Black women are forced into the untenable position of being constructed as overly sexualised beings (Davis, 2004) exploited by White male clandestine fantasies dating as far back as slavery, while simultaneously being marginalised by mainstream (White) concepts of beauty which overlook handsome Black female forms (Weeks, 1997). Craig (2002) highlights this point well in her book *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?* where she writes about the fact that at the same point in 1968 where feminists were protesting against the Miss America pageant because of the objectification of women, Black Americans were establishing an all-Black beauty pageant as a call for the recognition of Black beauty which had thus far been negated.

Issues of intersectionality arose throughout the research and this is a central part of the framework of Africanist Sista-hood too; however, it is on the issue of gender that the framework departs from many forms of feminism in highlighting

the view that gender is not necessarily experienced as the primary source of oppression for many Black women. There were many examples of this being articulated within the wider research but the example below demonstrates that our theoretical understanding and lived experiences are not always interpreted in the same way. ‘Dorcas’ uses humour to illustrate the fact that racism for her has been the primary source of oppression in comparison to sexism: ‘I WISH someone would be sexist towards me because all I have ever had is my colour, so I am not sure whether it is fortunate or unfortunate’.

Hudson-Weems (2000) in her work on *Africana Womanism* provides a clear message about the pervasive state of race as the major (though not only) factor in the subjugation of Black women. Johnson-Bailey (1999) in her research with Black women also found that ‘gender was not generally seen as a separate issue of discussion, race was most often advanced as a barrier to overcome’ (p. 661). Hudson-Weems (2000) makes clear her position that for Black women addressing issues of race is a pre-requisite for addressing issues of gender. For many Black feminists their position is that sexual politics under patriarchy is **as pervasive** in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race (Combahee River collective cited in Nikol & Simien, 2006) (emphasis added). Within *Africanist Sista-hood* there is recognition that race can be and often is **more** pervasive than gender (Obasi, 2019).

Discussion

British social work has a long and chequered history with issues of race, ethnicity and racism. Aymer and Bryan (1996) provide a top-down historical view up to the mid-1990s, with Wainwright (2009) providing greater insight to the impact of the challenge to racism from local communities, the move to radical social work aimed at eliminating colour blind approaches and a Black presence that became a catalyst for change. Williams (2020) provides contemporary analysis of current political and policy context including the conspicuous nature of the absence of race and ethnicity in research and the current call for a redux. The current pandemic and its exposure of structural racial inequalities coupled with the worldwide collective revulsion to the death of George Floyd, referred to by Oriola and Knight (2020) as a modern day lynching, has gone some way to raise race consciousness and waken the appetite for change in people of all races. In the UK and elsewhere, social work professional associations have provided statements of condemnation of racism and renewed commitments to anti-racism, but as a profession we need to do more.

Though the methodological approach discussed within this article may be different to that within existing literature, the participant narratives discussed as well as those within the wider study do share much commonality with existing work in this area. Participants discussed issues of a lack of representation in senior positions, censorship or obfuscation of discussions of race, tokenism and racism from both service users and colleagues all discussed by Mbarushimana and Robbins (2015). Wider participant narratives revealed underemployment, being undermined as a

manager and Black collective responses to direct racism similar to Tinarwo (2017). Other issues of race in social work outside the remit of my own study also have significance to the wider social work field including that which relates to Black and minority ethnic students (Bartoli et al., 2008; Fairtlough et al., 2014), Practice education (Wainwright, 2009) post qualifying education (Channer and Doel, 2009) and social work research (Williams, 2020). The issues are all linked.

The fact that Black students are recruited to social work courses in comparatively higher numbers (Bartoli et al., 2008; Fairtlough et al., 2014) can also be linked to the comparatively higher numbers of recruitment of African social work staff (Bartoli et al., 2008; Tinarwo, 2017), but what are the environments they find themselves in? The Black social workers in practice who courageously challenge the racism they see dealt to service users (Mbarushimana & Robbins, 2015), can also be linked to the same courage required of black academics in challenging the racism they witness towards Black and minority ethnic students. Mbarushimana and Robbins's (2015) point that this can lead to damaged relationships with colleagues, can often be linked to the issue of 'collective strategic projection' previously discussed. The drift to marginality of issues of race and ethnicity in social work, health and social care, and its relegation to a 'specialism' (Williams, 2020), cannot be separated from the 'othering' of non-Western forms of knowledge production (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010) which marginalised Black and minority people (Williams, 2020).

Tackling racism in social work is no easy task, but neither is the practice of social work. Despite previous attempts to tackle it, racism still maintains its stranglehold on the profession. Anti-racism needs to be centralised in all areas of social work. It needs to be central to the learning and teaching of students in academic institutions and practice arenas. It needs to be central not just to course content but also to assessment of students. It needs to be central to the training of practice educators and the continuous professional development of social work practitioners and their managers. Social work agencies need to do more to create an environment where race is no longer taboo, where Black and minority ethnic service users are a visible part of consultation and co-production of services, where Black students have their voices heard and their experiences validated as part of their practice learning experiences and where Black academics are seen as equal contributors to the production of knowledge.

Limitations of the study

There were limitations to the study. All the social workers were based in the north of England which creates limitations in terms of application of the findings. The original research spans wider than the social work profession and as such a similar study focused specifically on social workers and social work practice would provide more valuable insights. Qualitative research approaches provide deeper understandings of lived experiences but a mixed methods approach to the research which included an initial survey may well have provided more generalisable insights across a large sample group and help direct the study.

Conclusion

Applying the framework of Africanist Sista-hood in Britain allowed for the recognition of the importance of self-naming, history and Africanist perspectives on knowledge production. For social workers in this study, their identity was othered by the dominant structures of Whiteness in the workplace. This led to a skilful negotiation of both invisibility and hypervisibility as this played out in their working lives.

Issues of identity, equality, social justice and inclusion are central to the principles and values espoused by the social work profession, but how are we preparing all students to deal with issues of race and racism? Social work institutions, educators, practice supervisors, mentors and managers need to do more. If race is a taboo subject, then how do we discuss racism? If we cannot discuss racism then how do we confront it, challenge it and eradicate it? If it is not discussed among colleagues, then how is it discussed with those who use our services? These issues require urgent attention in social work and other professions guided by values in equality and social justice.

Anti-racist social work is more than avoiding racist language. It includes our contribution to the environments we work in. When working with service users, practitioners become skilled in seeking out both what is visible and what is absent in the circumstances they assess. These skills have value in observing what and who is visible or invisible in the workplace too. Social work colleagues, managers and practice supervisors contribute to the environment, teams and institutions they work in, and this has an impact on how these are experienced by others.

Reflexivity has much to offer social work and all those who work in it. Black perspectives, knowledge production and lived experiences have value beyond research and should also be firmly embedded within social work education and practice. Issues of invisibility, hypervisibility, privilege and entitlement are rarely recognised much less taught about.

Wainwright (2009), reflecting on the 1990s, talks of a conference presented by those committed to anti-racism in social work. One of the key messages for BME social workers was that doing nothing to tackle racism was equivalent to colluding with the system. This is a message that should be shared far beyond BME social workers. It is a message of relevance to all social workers, educators, researchers and anyone committed to anti-racist social work whatever their background. It is time to redouble our efforts and reaffirm our commitment via collective and cumulative contributions. Creating space in social work education, research and professional learning, for all practitioners to actively engage with these issues can only be to the betterment of the profession. If not now, then when?

Ethics

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ORCID iD

Chijioke Obasi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8508-6290>

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