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BAME Employees' Work Experience in the UK Public Sector: An Empirical Study of Academic and Research Libraries

Abstract

Purpose - The research was aimed at gauging the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff working in academic and research libraries across the UK, part of the higher education and public sector significantly under researched.

Design/methodology/approach - Using an essentially qualitative approach involving a focus group and in-depth interviews, the research design aimed to capture the lived experiences of BAME library employees.

Findings - BAME employees are very conscious of their ethnicity due to a feeling of being monitored and under pressure to perform to a higher standard. BAME staff are subjected to verbal racism including microaggression from co-workers. There is no adequate mechanism in place to address the concerns of BAME staff and represent their interests. BAME employees are overrepresented at lower ends of the profession and are not encouraged by line managers to pursue promotion opportunities leading to a distinct lack of diversity at the top level of academic libraries.

Research limitations/implications – There are implications for the work experience and career development of BAME library staff, for the leadership and management of libraries and the wider higher education sector to reflect upon.

Originality/value – Based on real life experiences of BAME staff, this research plugs a gap in a neglected area of the public and higher education sector and provides an opportunity for managers of academic libraries to reflect on the issues raised and consider interventions.

Keywords – Racism, discrimination, librarianship, ethnicity, equality, diversity, public sector, public management, organisational culture, microaggression

Article classification: Research paper

Introduction

The emergence of the Black Lives Movement (BLM) has placed greater spotlight on the plight of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities both in general and in an employment context. The movement has drawn attention to the continued disadvantage and discrimination experienced by BAME people. This study looks at the lived experience of BAME employees working in a part of the public and higher education (HE) sector in the UK that has been considerably under researched: academic and research libraries. Academic and research libraries are embedded within the structure of HE institutions. However, most studies in relation to the HE sector tend to focus on the experience of academic staff and students with little attention given to the experience of library staff. Whilst there is some limited data highlighting the marked lack of diversity in the library profession (CILIP and ARA, 2015), much less is known about the everyday experience of BAME staff. This research aims to bridge that gap by providing a voice to BAME employees working in this part of the HE sector. More specifically, the research question is: what is the experience of BAME employees working in academic and research libraries across the UK?

In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 placed significant responsibilities on public organisations to ensure that their policies and practices do not have a detrimental impact on employees with diversity characteristics. The findings of this research highlight that there are organisations and institutions in the public sector where BAME staff are experiencing discrimination and disadvantage. As a result, there are organisations that are not only failing to meet the obligations set out by legal instruments but are also failing from a social justice perspective to ensure equality for BAME employees (Dickens, 1999).

Theoretical underpinning

Historically there have existed a number of theories and frameworks which lay the foundations for our understanding of the origins and causes of racial inequalities experienced by BAME people both in society and in employment. Recently, these theories have received renewed interest as a result of the emergence of the Black Lives Movement and are rooted in multiple disciplines including sociology, cultural psychology, socio-economics, politics, history, legal studies, management, and philosophy. For example, Critical Race Theory (CRT) argues that the existence of racial inequalities is not unexpected given that race is a socially constructed concept that is used by white people to advance their economic and political interests at the expense of non-white people (Delgado and Stefancic, 1998). Inspired by the likes of, amongst others, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, CRT focuses on the attempts of white

people to continue their historical advantages over non-white people. Proponents of CRT argue that the social constructed view of race means that ‘whiteness’ is seen as the norm and white is seen as being dominant. This in turn results in less fairer outcomes for ethnic minorities in both society and organisations.

Further concepts that aid our understanding of racist and discriminatory behaviour, include the theory of social constructionism, which stresses the way in which individuals and society make sense of the world around them and how differing perceptions lead to differing views of people and hence their treatment (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). The following extract from the work of Salter *et al.* (2018) captures how the principles of CRT and social constructionism support our understanding of resultant racism and racial inequalities:

...racism is also systemic, existing in the advantages and disadvantages imprinted in cultural artifacts, ideological discourse and institutional realities that work together with individual biases...historically derived ideas and cultural patterns that maintain present-day racial inequalities.....through our preferences and selections, we maintain racialised contexts in everyday action.....we inhabit cultural worlds that in turn promote racialized ways of seeing, being in and acting in the world (p. 150).

This research is underpinned by Acker’s (2006) framework of inequality regimes which theorises the impact of internal dynamics within organisations on perpetuating and sustaining inequalities for women and minority groups in the workplace. As a result, it is highly relevant to this study. Acker’s concept of inequality regime defined as “loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations” (Acker, 2006, p. 43) makes a significant contribution in aiding our understanding of the unequal treatment and experience of BAME employees reported in this research.

Where the theoretical contribution of this study differs from other studies in this area is that Acker’s theory and model captures all the elements associated with organisational behaviour that help to explain the existence of inequality in workplace settings. Also, as indicated by Acker, to achieve the desired outcome and tackle organisational inequality may require managers to take robust action. This research provides an opportunity to examine the extent to which BAME staff experiences in academic and research libraries are rooted within inequality regimes as depicted by Acker.

Public management and equality and diversity

Dickens’ three pillar framework (1999) has often been viewed as providing the rationale for pursuing equality and diversity in organisations. These pillars include the legal case, the social

justice (or moral) case and the business case. The legal and social justice cases were traditionally viewed as being synonymous with the public sector as this sector was charged with the responsibility of ensuring that it was doing the right thing both morally and legally to challenge discrimination and disadvantage against women and minority groups (Healey *et al.*, 2011).

The emergence of New Public Management (NPM) in the developed world from the 1970s appeared to endanger the social justice case for promoting equality as it placed greater emphasis on the need to focus on private sector principles including the need to make the public sector more efficient (Deifenbach, 2009). The NPM agenda would see greater focus on reforms including cost savings aimed at making the public sector more competitive (Hood, 1991). However, this would be at the expense of making equality and diversity more marginalised areas (Davies and Thomas, 2002). Furthermore, a major programme of public sector reforms introduced by the Conservative government in the UK after its election in 1979 dubbed the 'New Right' agenda, together with NPM, were seen as raising significant tensions and contradictions between the values of this agenda and those underpinning traditional equal opportunities policies and practices in the public sector (Creegan *et al.*, 2003).

However, recent decades has seen a revitalisation of the equality and diversity agenda in the public sector as seen in the case of the UK. Significant new legislation on tackling inequality has placed greater onus on public managers and public services to reinforce the social justice message as well as enhance the legal case (EHRC, 2020). This has particularly been the case in relation to organisations and institutions with traditionally poor records on advancing equality and diversity such as the armed forces (Ishaq and Hussain, 2014). In addition, a positive development has been an acceptance among public managers that even the business case for promoting equality and diversity has a key role in the public sector. This is viewed by some as a beneficial by-product of NPM which although initially viewed as detrimental to the cause of equality, now is viewed as promoting it via the business case (Dickens, 1999). This is because the business case preaches the benefits to business of equality such as a more efficient use of human resources and the generation of competitive advantage (Bagshaw, 2004).

BAME employees work experience in the UK Public sector

Despite recent growth in studies on the work experiences of BAME staff in UK public sector organisations, literature in this field remains relatively limited (Seifert and Wang, 2016). In relation to the library sector, studies in this area are even more sparse with some empirical evidence from a UK context found in the work of Williams and Nicholas (2009) and a US

perspective from Alabi (2015) and Brook *et al.* (2015). These studies highlight the issues faced by BAME staff in the library sector and therefore justify the need for further studies such as this research to add to the current limited body of knowledge on this area. A key contribution of this research is therefore to build on the sparse literature in this area. Alabi's research (2015) in relation to the United States noted the existence of microaggression in academic libraries whilst Brook *et al.* (2015) noted the existence of racism and a culture of whiteness in US academic libraries. In the context of the UK, a small-scale qualitative study explored the low representation of BAME staff in the library and information science profession (Williams and Nicholas, 2009).

The remainder of this section provides a summary of the body of knowledge on the contemporary workplace experience of BAME employees in various sectors of the UK economy, highlighting the key themes that have emerged from those experiences.

Evidence suggests that the use of inappropriate language, including racial microaggression, stereotypical views, racism and racial discrimination pervade some of the UK's biggest public sector organisations including the NHS (Chand, 2018) and the Metropolitan Police (Warren, 2020). According to a study, discrimination against BAME employees costs the UK economy £2.6 bn a year in lost output (Webber, 2018).

Furthermore, data suggests that BAME employees are undervalued and that whilst there has been a narrowing of pay differentials between ethnic groups in recent years, marked differences still exist for some ethnic minority groups (EHRC, 2017). The vertical segregation of BAME workers with little opportunity for promotion and representation in leadership roles and horizontal segregation is also a hallmark of the UK labour market (Kirton and Greene, 2016). This affects a number of key public sector employers in the UK including the NHS (Randhawa, 2018), universities (ECU, 2017; Khan, 2017), and local government (The Global Recruiter, 2018). Studies show that systemic barriers within organisations mean that BAME employees become stuck at lower levels of the organisational ladder. Research has revealed that ethnic minorities are less likely to get top jobs in the UK public sector than they are in some of the biggest private sector companies (Ramesh, 2014).

In relation to workforce diversity, many organisations in the UK public sector fail to have workforces that reflect the communities they serve. Studies show that some of the most powerful UK public sector employers do not have ethnically representative workforces. These include the armed forces, the police and judiciary whom research by Duncan *et al.* (2018) noted were "decades away from becoming as ethnically diverse as the population they serve".

A reminder that the central research question in this study is: what is the experience of BAME employees working in academic and research libraries across the UK?

Methodology

Approach

The methodology adopted for this research has a qualitative underpinning as the aim of the research was to gauge the experiences of BAME staff working in academic and research libraries across the UK. A qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate in being able to capture the ‘lived’ experiences of BAME staff and reflects the interpretivist nature of the research (Collis and Hussey, 2014). As outlined by Saunders *et al.*, interpretivist philosophy challenges researchers to “enter the social world of our research subjects and understand their world from their point of view” (2009, p. 116).

Sample

The researchers enlisted the support of SCONUL (Society for College and National University Libraries) to gain access to BAME staff. SCONUL used internal methods of communication such as email and social media platforms to promote the research and invite interest from staff who identified as BAME. This allowed the researchers to collate a viable sample of participants willing to take part in the primary data collection process. SCONUL distributed a short staff survey inviting those who self-identified themselves as BAME to complete. Because SCONUL members do not currently monitor the ethnicity of their staff, it is not possible to quantify the number of employees who were targeted, and therefore, it is not possible to establish a response rate. The researchers simply reviewed those who indicated interest in the focus group and interviews and cross checked against various demographic variables such as gender, age-group, job role, ethnic group, religion or belief and duration in current employment of BAME staff to ensure that the sample was as representative as possible for both methods of data collection. In addition, the researchers ensured that from the pool of staff who indicated their willingness to participate, there was representation from ‘older’ established universities with a long academic tradition, also classed as research intensive, as well as from libraries hosted by ‘new’ and less established universities, often categorised as teaching intensive.

All the participants for the focus group and interviews were from different academic libraries. In total, there were 25 participants representing 25 different institutions. These institutions were geographically dispersed with participants from almost every region of the UK represented.

Methods

This research was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The methods adopted for collecting the primary data were agreed between the researchers and the project team representing SCUNL who provided the funding for the research and reflected the interpretivist nature of the research. As noted by Quinlan, “focus groups and interviews are often used in research undertaken within a social constructivist and interpretive philosophical framework” (2011, p. 286). A focus group - representing stage one of the data collection process - was hosted by the University of Birmingham as it was viewed as a fairly convenient location regardless of where participants were travelling from. The themes for the focus group were agreed between the researchers and the project team (see Appendix 1) and focused on the aim and objectives of the research and on issues that had emerged in previous studies of the experience of BAME employees. In total, 9 BAME employees took part in the focus group which was around two and a half hours duration.

Emerging themes from the analysis of the focus group helped inform the creation of an interview schedule that served as the basis for stage two of the data collection process: a series of one to one, in-depth interviews, with BAME staff (see Appendix 2). These in-depth interviews were conducted by phone from the premises of the researchers for reasons of convenience and cost effectiveness. A total of 16 interviews were conducted by two interviewers, with interviews ranging from 35 to 55 minutes. Only one interviewer was present at each interview. The interviews were semi-structured. None of the participants took part in both the focus group and the interviews.

Data analysis

The data collected was analysed with the help of NVivo – a qualitative data analysis software that is ideal when working with very rich text-based information and audio and video recordings (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Thematic analysis was applied to the two sets of data generated. This method allows researchers to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes within data and is ideal when working with large amounts of qualitative data such as transcripts from focus groups and interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The themes emerging from the two sets of data were correlated to identify common themes and threads which were used in the presentation of the findings (Bryman and Bell, 2011). This process also allowed issues of relevance and significance to be identified and given focus during the interpretation of the findings. Overall, the researchers adopted six steps in the process of thematic coding and analysis: familiarisation with the data through transcribing and repeated reading; devising a

coding system; coding the responses; searching for recurring themes; defining and naming the themes; and analysing the themes systematically. Member checking was not carried out as there was simply not enough time given the project deadline.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained for all stages of the data collection process through the principal researcher's institution and took full cognizance of issues such as confidentiality, anonymity, data protection and consent (Quinlan, 2011). All participants were given a participant information sheet which set out the purpose of the research, their role in the research, any potential risks and their right to withdraw at any point. Those participants who confirmed their willingness to take part in the research were issued with a consent form to sign to confirm their voluntary participation and agreement to be audio/video recorded.

The principal researcher's institution is registered with the Information Commissioner's Office who implements the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018. All personal data on participants was processed in accordance with the provisions of this legislation. The identity of all participants was protected during the reporting and presentation of the findings.

Findings

The primary research question as stated at the outset was the following: what is the experience of BAME employees working in academic and research libraries across the UK? The findings shed light on the 'lived' experience of BAME staff employed in academic and research libraries across the UK. To comply with the ethical requirements of the research and maintain the anonymity of individuals, those participants to whom quotes are attributed have been assigned either a letter or numeral. To aid differentiation between focus group participants and interviewees, the former have been assigned numerals and the latter letters.

Self-identity: awareness of ethnicity and impact on workplace experience

Those BAME staff whose ethnicity was particularly marked were more conscious of this and it appeared to have an impact on how they were treated in the workplace. The lack of diversity among library staff perpetuated the feeling of belonging to an ethnic minority group. This further created a sense of being monitored and singled out as highlighted in the following:

It's just sometimes you feel that you don't have the face that fits (*Interviewee J*).

....as a BAME member of staff, I tend to keep myself to myself...because I don't trust them fundamentally. So, they may have views of the fact that I keep myself to myself (*Interviewee H*).

I don't know if we are more closely monitored but I definitely feel that I have to get recognition. I feel that I have had to work harder than my white colleagues (*Interviewee K*).

.... when I talk with a couple of my colleagues, and one of them who's been giving me really superb off the record mentoring, like really has helped me....I've really benefited from that kind of advice.... every time she and I would have a meet by our desks or around the library... when one of the heads of service would go past they would make eye's like this [*makes staring gesture*]. Like, 'oh the brown people are talking. I wonder what they're plotting' and that kind of reverberated attitude....It made me feel watched. It made me feel like someone's observing you, someone's expecting me to plot something horrific (*Focus group participant 7*).

I think it kind of puts a lot of pressure on you if there's very few ethnic minorities represented in the staff.....I feel that I have to try that bit harder because I feel that not only am I representing myself as a member of staff, I'm also in some way representing how white people are gonna see every [*reference to participant's nationality*] person from hereon in because they might not see another [*reference to participant's nationality*] person for a very long time. So, you do feel that extra pressure of representing not just your profession but your race as well (*Focus group participant 4*).

Existence and manifestation of racism in the workplace

The research also explored whether BAME staff had experienced racism in their job. The findings reveal that whilst racism was not rampant it did exist and manifests itself through the use of inappropriate language and ignorance about cultural issues in the workplace, including what would be classed as racial microaggression:

I have had instances with colleagues who keep getting my name wrong and I don't think my first name is that difficult...I have people make comments about the fact that I'm vegetarian and it's because I'm a Hindu. And then I've had a supervisor in a previous job that during Ramadan she just turned around and said 'why aren't you fasting'? And made an assumption that I was Muslim. And then I had to say 'I'm not', then she said 'oh well what are you then'? And it was just the phrasing of it, just quite confrontational and abrupt (*Interviewee K*).

For some reason we seem to get each other's emails. There is another colleague called ****. Or people call as each other's names. They are totally different names aren't they? And we don't look alike and we don't work closely at all so why does this keep happening? (*Interviewee J*).

You have a sense of the fact that somebody is not treating you or treating someone else in a way that they ought to or that they're not giving people perhaps the opportunity that they ought to give them. But it's often at times difficult to pin that, that is exactly what is happening and to prove it. I think that we do have issues at the point of co-workers that I have some lovely people that I work with who are particularly supportive but I have some that I know are just seeking to put a dagger in (*Focus group participant 2*).

What was concerning based on the views of research participants was the fact that libraries were not viewed as having systems and procedures to deal effectively with complaints of racism raised by staff. A fundamental problem was the belief among some participants that there was a lack of appetite and willpower among management and HR departments to address the issue:

Like we've just introduced a sexual harassment, you know, online reporting system but there's not one for racism (*Interviewee C*).

What I think is the ineffectiveness of the personnel department. There is a lack of willingness to be sued or to take it anywhere. So, anything potentially negative that happens, personnel will do everything in their power, as far as I'm concerned, to mitigate the circumstance (*Focus group respondent 3*).

I think sometimes they're afraid to do some things because students pay x amount of money for an academic library. You know, they don't wanna take it further....(*Focus group participant 6*).

There was a feeling that BAME employees lacked voice and adequate representation in the employment relationship and there was lack of trust in trade unions who were viewed as unhelpful when BAME employees raise concerns:

...the unions are useless....I wouldn't join a union...unions were formed to keep black people out of work anyway. I don't see what the unions do in a way to make my experience as a BAME person any better within the organisation and I'd be loath to give them my money...(Interviewee H).

Disproportionate impact of training and development opportunities on BAME staff

Whilst training and development opportunities were viewed as generally adequate, BAME staff were however negatively impacted as such opportunities were less for those at the lower end of the job spectrum such as library assistants and it is at the lower end where BAME staff were overrepresented. Therefore, whilst the disproportionate impact of training and development opportunities was not unique to BAME staff, in practice they bore the brunt as they occupied more of the jobs at the lower end:

If you have got a lack of BAME people in management you are basically saying to them you can't have those equal opportunities of training. You know you are creating a barrier that should not exist and you should instead offer it to them much more to give them that thing (Interviewee C).

I think that's interesting (the lack of training opportunities) because when I was working as a library assistant there were very few opportunities beyond the mandatory training for me, whereas as a librarian, they're a bit more sort of open to suggestions and allowed me to go to any events or training that I've asked for...If you are sort of higher level the training opportunities are potentially greater (Interviewee K).

Occupational structure and limited opportunities for promotion

The nature of the job structure in academic libraries is such that opportunities for promotion are limited. However, as noted in relation to training above, the impact on BAME staff is considerably more detrimental as they are already underrepresented at higher levels and the lack of promotion opportunities hinders the possibility of addressing the lack of racial diversity at senior level:

I think the promotion opportunities are limited unless my director dies. There is very limited experience for promotion within the library services (Interviewee H).

I would say that they [promotion opportunities] are pretty limited. That's my personal experience as well as a kind of general sentiment that I hear quite a lot from people (Interviewee O).

I think the highest grade that you'll see a person of colour would be librarian grade. You wouldn't see anything higher up than that; I mean in terms of like promotion (Focus group participant 7).

A further obstacle faced by BAME library staff was the perception that line managers did not actively encourage BAME employees to pursue the limited promotion opportunities that arose:

...my experience has been I will go around that [my line manager] because I don't feel as though somebody's actually looking for me, to take me up. So, I have to find another path. We are always looking to find other ways because actually even if you are performing well, it's very hard to get somebody to acknowledge it (*Focus group participant 2*).

I've asked my line manager about it. You know, what are the opportunities for progression and I wouldn't say she was overly enthusiastic (*Interviewee D*).

Ethnic diversity of the library workforce

There was a strong sentiment that greater racial diversity of the library workforce was required both from a business case perspective and social justice standpoint as noted in the following:

I do enjoy it but because I am such a minority there is a subconscious feeling that you are not part of the whole big library team. You feel that there is some sort of subconscious racism there (*Interviewee J*).

It's essential especially for my current workplace. I would probably say 80 to 90% of students are from an ethnic minority background...the workforce does not reflect the student demographic (*Interviewee E*).

There is a whiteness in libraries that certainly where, the University I'm working at is not reflected in our student cohort (*Focus group participant 3*).

I think an ethnically diverse workforce is really important. A diverse workforce is more successful. They are more innovative and more creative. I am the only BAME person among around 90 library staff (*Interviewee H*).

Disquiet about the lack of ethnic diversity among the workforce of academic libraries extended to the upper layers of the job hierarchy with perceptions that the upper echelons of the library profession were dominated by white individuals. There was a feeling that institutional barriers hinder progression of BAME staff:

There is no people of colour in our senior leadership team...there is a concentration of black staff members in the lower grades. People that use the library...we don't reflect that. We live in London and we don't reflect the London communities (*Interviewee O*).

The top layers definitely [lack diversity] because they are only white managers in the library and there have been where I've worked. And we've never had somebody who isn't white in a management position.... I think the same is replicated in like CILIP and other organisations (*Interviewee C*).

Suggestions on how academic libraries can advance equality and diversity

Participants offered a basket of recommendations as to how academic libraries can advance equality and diversity ranging from increasing the diversity of staff, making it (equality and diversity) a strategic priority, to educating the essentially 'white' leadership about equality and diversity issues:

Increasing the number of staff, the diverse workforce you have and it needs to be prioritised as a key strategic area. It is not seen as a priority and it keeps getting mentioned and then forgotten about and nothing is being done about it really (*Interviewee J*).

I think it would be first of all to educate themselves cause I think almost exclusively they (the management and leadership) will all be white would be my guess (*Interviewee C*).

Awareness is fundamental, I mean there are some people who are probably not even aware what these things [equality and diversity] mean (*Interviewee N*).

Discussion

This research has demonstrated a range of workplace issues and challenges faced by BAME staff working in academic and research libraries. However, the findings also highlight that the experience reported in this study is not endemic to the academic library sector. The behaviours, attitudes and practices BAME staff in academic libraries are subjected to are typical of many workplaces in the UK as highlighted in the literature (CIPD, 2017; Chand, 2018; Rollock, 2019). The ‘lived’ experiences of BAME library staff illustrate the unequal opportunities and disadvantage faced by BAME employees in their working lives.

The findings draw attention to perceptions among BAME staff that they are being monitored due to their ethnicity. This mirrors the feelings of BAME academics in studies undertaken by Deem *et al.* (2005) and Wright *et al.* (2007) which noted a sense of being excessively scrutinised by managers and co-workers.

This study also substantiates perceptions among BAME employees in the UK that they have been unable to make progress in developing their careers having been overlooked for promotion, thereby echoing the findings of a study into BAME staff progression in the civil service (Ethnic Dimension, 2015). This further links with Miller’s (2019) research which notes the consequences of failure to promote BAME employees as leading to a marked lack of diversity in leadership in UK organisations.

Another aspect of the organisational environment that emerged from this study is the experience of racism, especially verbal with subtle undertones and what is now known as microaggression (Estascio and Saidy-Khan, 2014). This coincides with instances of microaggression experienced by ethnic minority staff in academic libraries in the US reported by Alabi (2015) and the existence of racism and a culture of ‘whiteness’ noted in US academic libraries in the work of Brook *et al.* (2015). Similar behaviour has been reported in other UK public sector organisations by Lewis and Gunn (2007) and Chand (2018). The findings concur with a study undertaken by Pearn Kandola (2018) which found that not only are BAME workers subjected to workplace racism in the UK but organisations do not have effective mechanisms to deal with it, with many employers displaying inertia and lack of willpower in addressing racist and inappropriate behaviour.

BAME employees in this research alluded to the lack of support networks in the workplace to help address grievances with trade unions viewed negatively when it came to providing a voice to BAME workers. The benefit of having employee support networks for ethnic minority

employees and women has been noted in Stewart's research into BAME staff career progression in the private sector (2016).

Lack of racial diversity among the workforce has been a particular problem in UK public sector institutions and organisations, in particular the failure to reflect communities and service users adequately as noted by Hussain and Ishaq (2016) and Duncan *et al.* (2018). The views of participants in this research allude to the lack of diversity among the library workforce and the failure of academic and research libraries to be reflective of their diverse service users.

The findings of this research reveal the impact of "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations" as depicted by Acker's inequality regimes (2006, p. 43). Acker's idea of inequality regimes is an analytic approach to understanding the ongoing creation of inequality in work organisations and how these regimes perpetuate inequalities in organisational settings. Acker's framework makes a significant contribution in aiding our understanding of the unequal treatment and experience of BAME employees in organisational settings including those in academic and research libraries reported in this research.

Implications and recommendations

Whilst the authors acknowledge the limitations of the research as noted in the section below, nevertheless the research has implications for BAME employees, managers, the leadership of academic libraries, the human resources (HR) function and for the wider institutions within which academic and research libraries operate.

For BAME employees, the findings suggest that they need to mobilise more effectively in order to have a voice. At present, trade unions are not viewed as an effective partner and BAME employees may need to explore the possibility of setting up alternative networks and structures within the workplace in order to represent their interests.

There are implications for the discipline of public management in the academic and library sector and across the wider institutions in which academic libraries are based. Managers and others occupying positions of authority and leadership need to reflect on the reality that academic and research libraries may not exhibit an organisational culture that values equality and diversity. Instead, libraries appear to display inequality regimes that discriminate and disadvantage BAME employees (Acker, 2006). The leadership of academic libraries and the wider institutions within which they operate should work towards the creation of a positive climate for diversity in the work environment.

Furthermore, managers may wish to reflect on the performance appraisal system to ensure that BAME staff with managerial potential are identified by line managers who then engage those staff in conversations related to career development.

There are also implications for the HR function given the lack of trust among BAME staff about the effectiveness of processes and procedures designed to deal with complaints of workplace racism. There is a need therefore to reevaluate current systems and the HR function in particular should lead on implementing a more effective system of reporting racial discrimination that instils confidence and trust among BAME employees.

There are also potential implications for BAME staff in other white majority countries. For example in the US context, limited academic literature as reported earlier noted similar issues including microaggression and lack of racial diversity in US libraries. This suggests that institutions in America should consider the findings of this research and may find some of the recommendations applicable to their particular context in helping to improve the work experience of BAME staff.

In addition to the practical implications noted above, it is important given that this is academic research to highlight the implications for theory and future research. For theory and current literature, the findings add to the body of knowledge by firstly substantiating what extant literature has revealed about the inequalities faced by ethnic minority employees in organisational settings (Kirton and Greene, 2016) and secondly by validating Acker's concept of how those inequalities result (2006). In relation to the latter, existing literature could learn by recognising that inequalities are the consequence of a combination of organisational dynamics as noted by Acker (2006) and that focus should be given to all those dynamics as part of the diversity management process. In addition, the insights from this research add to the evidence in the literature of the experience of BAME employees from a sector previously absent in the diversity management literature. In relation to future research, the findings open up the possibility for researchers to capture the response of managers in addressing the issues highlighted given that this research did not collect data from managers.

Limitations

In any research undertaken, qualitative or quantitative, it is important to acknowledge limitations. As this study is about the 'lived' experience of BAME staff working in academic and research libraries, it should be stressed that the data is perception-based and self-reported data even though those perceptions are based on the experience of participants. Furthermore, the research did not engage with a non-BAME sample so we cannot say conclusively that all

the issues faced by BAME staff are endemic only to them. Also, it is worth appreciating that it is difficult to make generalisations from this type of study. For example, an element of caution has to be exercised in assuming that the views of focus group participants and interviewees are necessarily representative of those BAME staff who did not take part in the research. Although the limitations associated with qualitative studies need to be acknowledged, equally however, the opportunities that qualitative research of this type presents in capturing the direct voices of participants should be embraced.

Conclusion

The findings of this research shed light on the real-life experience of BAME staff engaged in the execution of their duties in academic and research libraries, a part of the public and HE sector that has been under researched. The findings reveal that academic and research libraries have some way to go in addressing institutional, structural and systemic bias against BAME staff which manifests itself in a variety of ways. Despite the existence of racism and unequal opportunities, the majority of BAME staff in this research did not reveal an inclination to exit the profession and there is little evidence of large-scale flight from the profession. Rather BAME staff expressed resilience and a desire to fight for their rights in a profession that they appear to cherish. If academic libraries and their host institutions are willing to implement strategies to address the challenges faced by BAME staff, then they would go some way towards rewarding that loyalty. Challenging organisational culture, structures and processes that perpetuate and sustain racial inequality and bias would be a good starting point in moving the agenda forward (Acker, 2006). The current pandemic represents an opportune time to address issues. Although this research was conducted prior to the pandemic, Covid-19 has highlighted the scale of the structural discrimination and systemic deep-rooted racial inequalities in the labour market that have meant BAME employees being more exposed to Covid-19 as a result of being overrepresented in insecure jobs with fewer rights. BAME employees have also reported an increase in unfair treatment at work during the pandemic (TUC, 2020).

The key contributions of this research include shedding light on the employment experience of BAME staff in a part of the public and HE sector often forgotten in favour of the wider institutions in which the academic and library sector is embedded, and the wide-ranging practical implications for the key players in the employment relationship, including public managers.

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Appendix 1 – Focus group schedule

- Experience of working in an academic library
- Relationship with co-workers/managers/library users
- Views on whether discrimination encountered in the workplace/source of discrimination/how it was dealt with, if relevant
- Opportunities for promotion/experience of promotion process
- Work-life balance/flexible working opportunities
- Level of employee voice and consultation opportunities
- Awareness of employer initiatives to advance the equality and diversity agenda
- Availability of appropriate training and development opportunities to execute job role effectively
- Whether organisation offers suitable rewards and incentives to employees

Appendix 2 – Interview schedule

- Motivation for pursuing a career in the information/library profession
- How did you become aware of employment opportunities in this sector?
- Experience of the recruitment/selection process
- Awareness/experience of promotion opportunities/process
- Views on relationship with line managers/senior managers/level of support received
- Perceptions of current role. What do you most enjoy about your role? What do you least enjoy? Challenges faced.
- Views on whether more closely monitored due to being a BAME member of staff/level of awareness/sense of consciousness of being a BAME staff member
- Experience of racial discrimination in the workplace and source of any discrimination
- Views on importance of an ethnically diverse workforce
- Whether adequate level of training and development opportunities made available
- Views on whether workplace values equality and diversity
- Suggestions as to what the profession/senior managers can/should do to further advance equality and diversity
- Finally, what would be your message to BAME individuals considering a career in this sector?