

Academic Paper

The value of mentoring in supporting career progression and a sense of belonging for Black social workers, when working in a predominantly White-dominant profession

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Abstract

Mentoring is embedded in social work education, but little is known of how workplace mentoring supports the career progression of Black social workers. Using narrative analysis this UK-based study interviewed five Black social workers. Findings highlight the importance of psychosocial mentoring (provided by same-ethnicity mentors) and sponsorship mentoring (provided by cross-ethnicity mentors). This study also raises challenges for all mentors when working in contexts of disadvantage.

Keywords

mentoring, Black social workers, same-ethnicity mentoring, cross-ethnicity mentoring

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Introduction

Mentoring is one mechanism used to support the career progression of the working population but within the UK people of colour are not progressing as expected (Ogbonna, 2019). Within the social work profession, the lack of racial diversity in leadership is noticeable. Workforce statistics reveal a low representation of Black social workers in senior positions within Adult and Children and Family social care departments (Adult Social Care Statistics Team, 2019; Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2020). Workforce statistics also reveal that the UK social care workforce is largely White-dominant, as highlighted in figure 1.

Working in a White-dominant profession is likely to impact the career progression of Black social workers. This view is based on Harris and Ogbonna's (2016) paper, which suggests workplace discrimination is likely when demographically similar groups are dominant in a workplace. This is because a dominant group is likely to maintain its dominance by recruiting and promoting people who are demographically like them. In the case of a White-dominant workplace, this behaviour

maintains the social order of White power (Ogbonna, 2019). This may account for why two-thirds of n=100 UK Black child protection social workers believed their ethnicity causes a barrier to career progression (Brown et al., 2021). Furthermore, it has been noted that people of colour are likely to experience psychological stress when attempting to negotiate White-dominant workplaces and to reduce this stress they adopt working identities that counter common cultural stereotypes with this behaviour emotionally taxing (Carbado and Gulati, 2000). Psychological stress does not appear to abate when people of colour are in leadership positions within White-dominant workplaces. Indeed, Hekman et al. (2016) indicate this is because there is a belief personal repercussions will result if they are seen to promote someone who is demographically similar to them. These challenges result from long-standing systems and structures which subtly maintain racial inequality (Mutua, 2011). It is therefore important to consider the mentoring of Black social workers within this context.

Figure 1: UK nationwide social work workforce statistics

Source	Statistics indicate Black social workers are working within a White-dominant profession.
Adult Social Care Statistics Team (2019)	In Adult Social Care departments whilst social workers of colour represent 23.6% of the workforce they are the least employed in leadership positions. Also, White workers (administration workers, occupational therapists, and social workers) form the majority of professionals (85%) within this professional context.
Department for Education (2019)	A workforce survey of Children and Family Social Care departments identified 11.1% of social workers were Black (4.8% Black African, 4.4% Black Caribbean, and 1.9 % Black Other) whilst 71.7% of social workers (n=31,720) were White.
Association of Directors of Children's Services (2020)	This report highlighted that out of 94 Directors of Children and Family Services, only 1% of directors identified as Black Africa or Black Caribbean.

This study seeks to contribute to the understanding of how mentoring can support the career progression of Black social workers. Following a literature review, this paper outlines the method used to collect and analyse the data. Findings are then documented which suggest a synergy should exist between psychosocial (provided by same-ethnicity mentors) and sponsorship (provided by cross-ethnicity mentors) mentoring. These two mentoring functions provide a collective value that contributes to mitigating the effects of workplace inequality. The study concludes by making recommendations for the future education, training, and continuing professional development of mentors.

Literature Review

For years mentoring has been used in organisations as a career development tool (Baugh & Sullivan, 2005). Within the social work profession, the benefits of mentoring include professional development in early-stage career through to role transition at the management level (McMurray et al., 2014). Although studies exist which consider mentoring within social work and related professions there is no specific research considering how mentoring impacts the career

progression of Black UK social workers. This is because most UK studies considering mentoring, focus on Black student social workers within Higher Education Institutions. For example, Cropper (2000) reports on the value of a peer mentoring scheme to address the social exclusion of students from non-traditional backgrounds whilst Bartoli, Kennedy and Tadam's (2009) study suggests Black African students would benefit from mentoring schemes where they are matched with Black social workers who can act as befrienders. The notion of matching mentees with mentors who share a heritage or ethnicity is not new. Indeed, the positive effect, like increased academic attainment for students at Higher Education Institutes has been reported when students are matched with mentors of similar ethnicity (Campbell & Campbell, 2007). The value of matching a mentee to a mentor may lie in the psychosocial support this relationship provides where a sense of belonging (Schwan et al., 2013) through a shared identity (Santos & Reigadas, 2001; Thomas, 1990) is fostered. The effectiveness of same-ethnicity mentoring relationships seems likely because these mentoring dyads have shared experiences of racism, microaggression, and oppression (Reddick, 2011; Schwan et al., 2013). The value of shared experiences means a mutual understanding exists which allows mentors to explore these experiences, authentically validating them, and then respond in constructive ways as they support mentees to find strategies to manage or confront these issues. Reddick's (2011) study reported that a shared cultural identity enhances trust, with trust central to the mentoring relationship when concerns of racism are discussed. Additionally, same-ethnicity mentoring has been seen as a safe dyad unlike cross-ethnicity mentoring where tension through cultural miscommunication can result because of differences in background, values and attitudes (Brown et al., 2009; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002).

The function of psychosocial-mentoring, within the workplace, is to enhance a mentee's 'sense of competence, identity, and effectiveness in their professional role' (Kram, 1985, p.32). Here role modelling, acceptance and approval are features of the mentoring relationship, and the outcome of this mentoring function is associated with subjective career success, like increased job satisfaction (Allen et al., 2004). Psychosocial-mentoring is not intended to advance the career of a mentee as this is the function of sponsorship-mentoring.

Sponsorship-mentoring is usually provided by a mentor who holds power and influence (Clutterbuck, 2014). Typically these mentors have high-ranking positions within the workplace (Ragins et al., 2000) and are committed to the mentee's upward mobility (Ragins and McFarlin, 1990). Upward mobility usually occurs through mentors providing protection and coaching as they increase a mentee's exposure and visibility by engaging them in challenging assignments (Kram, 1985). Increasing a mentee's exposure, within a protective mentoring relationship, means a mentee is more likely to successfully negotiate workplace micro-level systems (Kram, 1985). Indeed, a study involving n=143 academics found career success occurred when mentors, acting as sponsors, supported mentees to develop social and networking skills (Kirchmeyer, 2005). Here sponsorship-mentoring sent signals to others of a mentee's ability, reputation and organisational fit. The value of sponsorship-mentoring, within Higher Education Institutions, is highlighted in Stanley and Lincoln's (2010) publication which focuses on cross-ethnicity mentoring relationships. Here White faculty mentors were encouraged to consider their privilege and use their influential power in support of Black faculty mentees' career development.

The literature highlights the value of psychosocial and sponsorship mentoring with both functions holding different, yet equally valuable purposes. This current study explores how mentoring can aid the career progression of Black social workers, with the literature highlighting this as an under-researched area. As such this study focuses on the potential for mentoring to support the career progression of Black social workers, thus addressing workplace inequality. This study also considers how a sense of belonging can be fostered in this White-dominant workplace.

Methodology

Design

In the pursuit of capturing the subjective experiences of Black social workers, narrative analysis was the preferred method because it is interested in how people talk about, position themselves, and make sense of their experiences (Wang & Geale, 2015). Several forms of narrative analysis exist with this study favouring dialogical narrative analysis (Frank, 2010; Riessman, 2008). This approach is interested in how a story is dialogically produced and performed within a specific context (Riessman, 2008). Here a shared dialogue between the researcher and participant explore the meaning of something. In this study, the focus on context is important and dialogical narrative analysis recognises how social and cultural stories around context, like being Black in a White profession, may inform mentoring experiences (Sarbin, 1986).

A purposive sampling strategy was employed allowing 'information rich' (Merriam, 2009, p.77) participants to be targeted. To be eligible participants had to:

1. self-identify as a person of colour
2. have experience working within local authority employment as a social worker,
3. have experience being mentored.

Five participants, as seen in the table below*, meeting these eligibility criteria, were recruited through personal contacts. All participants identified as Black. Two participants, in senior social work positions, identified as first-generation Black British whilst the remaining participants were front-line social workers, identifying as Black African. Participants were interviewed via an electronic platform (Zoom) which enabled conversations to be recorded for transcription purposes. A lightly structured interview schedule guided the data collection process.

Table 1: Participants profiles

Identifier	Career Position	Length of service	Gender	Age category	Country of origin	Experience of cross-ethnicity mentoring	Experience of same-ethnicity mentoring
Tanika	Assistant Manager in Children and Family Social Work	15 yrs.	F	41-50	Black British with Caribbean heritage	Yes (formal and informal)	Yes (formal)
Jackson	Social Worker in Adult Services	2 yrs.	M	41-50	Black African	Yes (formal)	Yes (formal)
Precious	Social Worker in Children and Family Services	2.5 yrs.	F	31-40	Black African	Yes (formal)	Yes (formal)
Charles	Independent Reviewing Officer. Children's Services	9 yrs.	M	21- 30	Black British with Black African heritage	Yes (formal)	Yes (formal and informal)
Catherine	Social Worker in Children and Family Services	3 yrs.	F	51-60	Black African	Yes (formal)	Yes (formal)

*participants have been given pseudonyms

Data analysis

Dialogical narrative analysis allows for a prolonged focus on each participant's evolving story and identity, within the context of their experiences, before comparisons are made across the narratives (Frank, 2010; Riessman, 2008). There is no step-by-step guidance as to how this approach is conducted rather it is expected researchers work from a set of principles where dialogical questions are asked as narratives are analysed (Caddick, 2012). In this study questions adapted from examples of Riessman's (2008) and Frank's (2010) dialogical questions were considered alongside Caddick's (2012) dialogical question framework where identity, resource and connections/affiliations are considered when analysing the narratives (Table 2). These questions consider what stories were being addressed within the narratives, in terms of what these stories do for, and to, people (Caddick, 2012).

Table 2: Dialogical questions developed from Caddick (2012 p. 260-261) framework and influenced by Frank (2010) and Riessman (2008)

Types of questions	Examples	Purpose
<p>Identity questions.</p> <p>Identity questions enable an understanding of how people tell stories to make sense of who they are and who they might become. Questions like, 'what identities are being performed?' or 'What is the meaning-making function of the narrative?' are asked.</p>	<p>How is the storyteller's identity shaped by the story they are telling?</p> <p>How do others validate the story being told?</p>	<p>Helps the researcher understand how people's identities develop according to the stories they tell about themselves. These questions acknowledge people not only tell stories to explore who they are but also how they live, enact, and perform in social life.</p>
<p>Resource questions.</p> <p>These are stories people tell by drawing upon narrative structures that culture and society make available. Questions like, 'how are cultural templates represented?' or 'How does the wider context impact upon the story?' are asked.</p>	<p>What narrative resources does the storyteller borrow from the wider stock of cultural narratives to tell their story? Here experiences of working in a White-dominant workplace are likely to be told.</p>	<p>These questions help the researcher understand how people can tell the stories they tell and where these stories come from.</p>
<p>Connection/affiliation questions</p> <p>Certain stories may be approved or disapproved of by people or groups, impacting how stories are told. Questions like, 'what other narratives are being drawn upon? Or 'what narrative identities are privileged/suppressed or excluded?' are asked.</p>	<p>Who does this person's story connect them to or disconnect them from?</p>	<p>Understanding who shares a person's story and who is opposed to it gives us valuable information about the social process of storytelling.</p>

Using the dialogical questions developed from Caddick's (2012) framework, whilst considering the types of dialogical questions Riessman (2008) and Frank (2010) suggest, several individual storylines surfaced. Similarities and differences between these surfacing storylines were then considered with this process leading to emerging themes. For example, storylines of mentoring heroes and villains surfaced around the theme of belonging within a White-dominant workplace.

Similarly, storylines of wise and misguided oppressive mentors surfaced around career progression, within a White-dominant workplace.

Findings

Key opposing narrative types (hero vs. villain and wise vs. misguided oppressor) were identified within this study, with these findings based upon the interview data. These key narrative types are not intended to include all the storylines which surfaced rather they are narratives focusing on mentoring relationships and experiences. These narrative types are linked to two themes – the value of belonging and the importance of career progression, as supported by mentors. The first theme, the value of belonging, relates to the importance of psychosocial mentoring, supported by same-ethnicity mentors. Within this theme the hero and villain surface as key opposing narrative types. The second theme, the importance of career progression, as supported by a career director emerges where sponsorship mentoring, supported by cross-ethnicity mentors is addressed. Within this theme the wise and misguided oppressor surface as key opposing narrative types.

Theme 1: I want to belong – the hero and the villain

The hero was a powerful storyline that surfaced across narratives and throughout this study. Here the value of psychosocial support was reiterated as a valued aspect of same-ethnicity mentoring. Indeed, the importance of shared experiences created a sense of deep understanding aiding a sense of belonging in a workplace that could, at times, feel overbearing because it is White-dominant.

Precious: My current mentor is Black African, like me. I can connect to her on many levels, and she to me. We share similar experiences; we are classified as having a minority status here. In Africa, we were a majority. This impacts your identity; my mentor understands this.

The uniqueness of these mentoring dyads often lay in the commonalities shared, with mentors being able to display authentic empathy and understanding. Often the lack of career progression left Black social workers questioning their value in the workplace but described experiences of authentic empathy, reinforced the notion they were not alone in their workplace struggles.

Charles: When I was not successful [in accessing] the management training programme my White mentor said to reapply in a year, that was it! I contacted my old Nigerian mentor, she empathised with me, supporting me to deal with the feelings of being rejected and then spent two hours going through what I needed to do to gain the experience needed.

Paradoxically, the villain storyline also surfaced across narratives. Here instances of what appeared to be a form of micro-aggressive behaviour from same-ethnicity mentors surfaced. Some of the described experiences were overtly discriminatory like the experience Precious recalls when her mentor, of mixed-race heritage, said that because she was Black African her work required closer scrutiny. This overt discrimination left Black social workers confused with mistrust developing in these mentoring relationships. Also emerging from several storylines was the notion that cross-ethnicity mentors when in senior positions, adopted a White-dominant identity. This resulted in these mentors becoming unapproachable, unavailable, and even appearing ignorant to issues of racism as they appeared to denounce their ethnic-heritage identity.

Charles: In my current role the leadership is very White, but our Chief Officer is a Black man. Again, I feel he is disconnected. I cannot go to him with issues of race ... when you speak to him you know you must turn your Blackness off.

Although these same-ethnicity mentors were ideally suited to provide sponsorship mentoring, because of their senior positions, Black social workers avoided pursuing these mentoring relationships. Indeed, it was suggested throughout this study that once a person of colour was in a senior leadership position, within this White-dominant profession, they become socialised into a style of leadership that eroded the essence of who they were, as people of colour.

Interestingly, storylines surfaced where same-ethnicity mentors were heroes but simultaneously and unwittingly were also villains. For example, it was revealed that same-ethnicity mentors, at times, limit the career progression of Black social workers because of their overly nurturing approach. This mentoring approach appeared to be grounded in the need to psychologically protect the Black social worker from disappointment. Tanika expressed this by recalling her same-ethnicity mentor cautioning her not to approach White-leadership with a service improvement idea, which Tanika believed could advance her career.

Tanika: My mentor told me not to tell anyone of my idea because they [referring to White senior management] would take it from me and develop it themselves. I was cautioned to remember that White people don't think Black people have the brains [to develop ideas and progress].

Connecting to the notion that same-ethnicity mentors could simultaneously be heroes and villains surfaced when these mentors unintentionally reinforced historic cultural narratives of difference and subordination to White-dominance. It was considered this over-identification unwittingly limited career progression with Black social workers believing they were unable to progress because of the obstacles associated with working in a White-dominant profession.

Theme 2: I need a career director – the wise and misguided oppressor

Storylines throughout this study recognised the value of being mentored by someone in a senior leadership position who had influence. Occasionally, these mentoring relationships were provided by cross-ethnicity mentors. Psychosocial support was not always associated with these mentoring dyads suggesting the associated benefit gained from these relationships was rooted in how cross-ethnicity mentors could address inequality by creating opportunities for career advancement.

Tanika: He put me in touch with [the person] who runs leadership training, for Black and Asian managers ... I didn't fit the criteria, because I was not a team manager so he [influenced my entrance onto the course] by explaining I could be a team manager; I just had lacked opportunity.

Trust was an important aspect of these mentoring relationships where open conversations around race and racism could be had. Trust appeared to be founded on the mentor's appreciation of how structural racism resulted in the lack of opportunity for Black social workers. Within these relationships, it was also important for these mentors to acknowledge their White privilege and use their position to support initiatives that would address workplace inequality. Here storylines of the wise cross-ethnicity mentor surfaced.

Tanika: My mentor is helping drive the subgroup for the Equality and Diversity group. She gets it now, but I had to tell her she needed to drive it. If I try and drive it, it's not going anywhere.

Effective mentoring provided by cross-ethnicity mentors resulted from the mentor recognising the impact of systemic oppression. The recognition that racial inequality was maintained through systems and structures, developed by White people, contributed to a successful relationship, however not all cross-ethnicity mentors acknowledged the impact of racism or recognised how structures continued to maintain White privilege.

Catherine: When you are mentored by White mentors, things are distorted ... they look at things through a White lens of privilege.

It was frequently mentioned that cross-ethnicity mentors viewed career progression through a White privileged lens, unaware of the obstacles that existed for Black people. Indeed, it was considered these mentors were uncomfortable or unwilling to acknowledge differences or that inequality existed. This is where storylines of the misguided oppressor surfaced.

Several storylines throughout this study reveal the belief that Black social workers were required to work harder. Jackson recalls this message beginning at university where cross-ethnicity mentors inferred that as a Black social worker he would need to work harder as the profession was White-dominant, so career progression would be more difficult. The sense Jackson made from being told to work harder, as a Black social worker, surrounded the belief there was a hidden agenda with cross-ethnicity mentors subtly exerting their oppressive power.

Jackson: They're trying to keep us down; trying to oppress us so we give up and believe we can't advance.

This message progressed into the workplace where storylines of needing to work harder to prove worth were expressed.

Charles: When you get into those senior positions, as a Black person, your White counterparts and mentors make you feel you're not as educated, and you won't deliver the same way they can. So, we must work doubly hard.

It seems the cultural narrative of needing to work harder to prove worth might be embedded in stereotypical beliefs historically held by a White-dominant society, that people of colour are inferior, so are required to prove their worth.

Racial disadvantage attributed to stereotyping beliefs held by cross-ethnicity mentors was also experienced by several Black social workers. For instance, Tanika recalls her frustration when cross-ethnicity mentors steered her in a career direction that limited her exposure to a breadth of experience required for career progression.

Tanika: I was only allocated cases with Asylum seeking children. When I questioned this, I was told I would understand these children better. How would I? I have never been forced from my country, leaving my family. It was almost like they knew, there was no point in driving me in another direction because there was nowhere for me to go.

The limitation of career progression when cross-ethnicity mentors held stereotyping biases was only one behaviour limiting a Black social worker's career progression. Also expressed were instances of discrimination where cross-ethnicity mentors appeared to withhold information regarding training opportunities. There is a danger that cross-ethnicity mentoring dyads disadvantage Black social workers with this disadvantage, another form of oppression, seen to maintain the social order of White-dominance.

Discussion

This section presents a critical discussion of the research findings within the context of existing literature.

What do same-ethnicity mentors need to know?

The value of a shared identity, within same-ethnicity mentoring dyads, was a finding unique to this mentoring relationship. This is because a shared identity reinforces a sense of belonging within a White-dominant workforce. This finding is unsurprising as mentoring literature suggests shared interests and backgrounds enhance mentoring relationships (Frierson et al., 1994; Walker et al., 2001). Indeed, the value of psychosocial support resulting from same-ethnicity mentoring dyads is mentioned in several studies (Brown et al., 2009; Santos & Reigadas, 2001), with a shared identity fostering a sense of belonging (Thomas, 1990). Certainly, the uniqueness of same-ethnicity mentoring dyads lies in the commonalities shared where mentors can display authentic empathy when issues of racism, microaggression, and oppression are raised. Indeed, the value of authentic empathy has been mentioned in two publications (Reddick, 2011; Schwan et al., 2013).

Whilst great value exists in the psychosocial support within same-ethnicity mentoring dyads this study also revealed some unexpected challenges. Indeed, micro-aggressive behaviour and acts of disassociation, as well as the suppression of opportunities, were identified.

Micro-aggressive behaviour and acts of disassociating behaviour

It would seem some same-ethnicity mentors can display a form of micro-aggressive behaviour towards their mentees. This behaviour whether conscious or unconscious is usually associated with a dominant group subtly displaying derogatory behaviour towards someone from a marginalised group (DeAngelis, 2009; Hopper, 2019). However, Hekman et al. (2016) assert to this behaviour being displayed by people of a minority group. Undeniably, this display of micro-aggressive behaviour is a means of self-protection with Hekman et al. (2016) proposing that minority groups are discouraged from engaging in diversity-valuing behaviour, within workplaces and are penalised if they do so. This may account for why micro-aggressive behaviour has been reported in this study within same-ethnicity mentoring dyads.

Acts of disassociation within same-ethnicity mentoring dyads were also reported where mentors appeared to 'turn their blackness off'. Although mentoring literature does not appear to address disassociated behaviour when ethnicity is considered, literature does highlight a similar phenomenon albeit gender-related (Mavin, 2006; Mavin, Grandy and Williams, 2014). Mavin, Grandy and Williams (2014) found disassociated behaviour occurring between female intra-gender workplace relationships resulting from competitiveness due to working in a male-dominant environment. Here, women in senior positions align themselves to a masculine social order displaying intra-gender micro-aggressive behaviour as they protected their position (Mavin, 2006). Although this explanation is gender-related it seems a plausible explanation for what was reported in this study, where same-ethnicity mentors tried to protect their position by disassociating themselves from their Black mentees by 'turning their blackness off'. Another explanation for disassociated behaviour is the idea that people of colour, in senior leadership positions within a White-dominant workplace, feel the need to conform to a White-dominant system with this system dictating action and behaviour (Colley, 2003). This disassociation can then lead to these leaders appearing oppressive. This alludes to the idea that minority groups need to align with the behaviours of a dominant group because conformity, through relatedness, ensures security. This idea is understood when considering the value of safety gained from a collective identity (Burke & Stets, 2009) where people of colour try to fit into White-dominant workplaces by forming working identities that counter common cultural stereotypes (Carbado and Gulati, 2000). When leaders of colour conform to a White-dominant system this results in relatedness and trust being lost within this mentoring dyad.

The suppression of opportunities

Another form of micro-aggressive behaviour, resulting from same-ethnicity mentoring dyads, was the suppression of opportunities hindering career progression. This appeared to occur when same-

ethnicity mentors reinforced the notion of racial subordination to a White system. Similarly, Grandy and Williams (2014) found micro-aggressive behaviour where women, in senior leadership, subconsciously suppressed, blocked, and denied other women from progressing by limiting access to resources or opportunities. Whilst Mavin, Grandy and Williams's (2014) study describe this micro-aggressive behaviour as a subconscious obstruction this study described this behaviour as overly nurturing, indeed a protective caution.

What do cross-ethnicity mentors need to know?

The value of cross-racial mentoring, where mentors used their influence to promote initiatives benefitting people of colour was highlighted in this study. The success of these mentoring dyads was however built on openness where racism was recognised, acknowledged, and understood and where trust had developed. Some studies have found trust in cross-ethnicity mentoring relationships results, in part, from the willingness of mentors to listen, without judgement, to their mentees' experiences of racial oppression and discrimination (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004: 2007; Stanley & Lincoln, 2010). This notion seems unsurprising when considering Clutterbuck's (2012) statement that mentoring relationships, where diversity is present, can be successful if there is a shared understanding of difference and a suspension of judgment.

Also revealed in this study were two areas adversely impacting cross-racial mentoring relationships, these being a lack of a shared identity and the impact of negative stereotyping. These areas demonstrate how complex cross-ethnicity mentoring is because race and racism are factors, often not addressed, but rooted in the relationship.

Lack of a shared identity

A shared ethnic identity can enhance mentoring relationships (Frierson et al., 1994; Walker et al., 2001) but in cross-ethnicity mentoring relationships, there is no shared experience of negotiating systems and structures which maintain the social order of White-dominance (Harris, 1995). This study found cross-ethnicity mentors appeared to view career progression through a White privileged lens not understanding the barriers (psychological and structural) which exist for Black social workers. This lack of understanding led to storylines of scepticism. Thomas (2001) professes to scepticism developing when racial diversity is limited in the workplace. Within this study, scepticism renders a cross-ethnicity mentoring relationship unsafe because the mentee believes hidden agendas exist to maintain a social order of White-dominance.

The impact of negative stereotyping

Black social workers were made to feel incapable and not as educated as White social workers, with comments made by cross-ethnicity mentors affirming negative stereotyping beliefs which have historically been held by White people. This finding is consistent with Thomas's (2001) claim that people of colour tend to feel the need to prove worth when cross-ethnicity mentors affirm, intentionally or unintentionally, negative stereotyping beliefs. Proving one's worth has also been observed in studies conducted in White-dominant Higher Education Institutions where Black students report feeling pressured to prove their intellectual ability (Strayhorn, 2008) and worthiness (Davis et al., 2004).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This is the first UK study to consider how mentoring experiences of Black UK social workers, influence their career progression. The research found that the ethnicity of mentors seems to influence the type of benefit gained from the mentoring dyad. For instance, same-ethnicity mentors provide invaluable psychosocial support which promotes a sense of belonging within this White-

dominant profession whereas cross-ethnicity mentors, in senior roles, were uniquely positioned to act as sponsors, aiding the career progression of Black social workers.

Findings suggest not all mentors are equipped or effective in mentoring Black social workers because of challenges that exist when working in contexts of disadvantage. Several, but different, messages have arisen within this study for same-ethnicity and cross-ethnicity mentors. For example, same-ethnicity mentors need to consider how they may reinforce cultural narratives of conformity and subordination when promoting a sense of belonging. This can occur through self-identification when sharing experiences of racism. It is recommended that training and supervision support reflection and reflexivity around conversations which may reinforce the adverse message of compliance to a White system. Similarly, cross-ethnicity mentors must be challenged through training and supervision to consider how racial inequality, maintained through structures and systems, retain White privilege. It is these long-standing oppressive structures and systems which continue to perpetuate narratives of inequality. Cross-ethnicity mentors need to raise their awareness through reflective and reflexive practices around privilege, race and racism whilst also addressing structural racism which continues to impact the career progression of Black social workers.

This study proposes a combined value of psychosocial mentoring (provided by same-ethnicity mentors) and sponsorship-mentoring (provided by cross-ethnicity mentors) in addressing workforce inequality. Both mentoring functions can enhance the career progression of Black social workers, albeit differently. Furthermore, it was recognised that same-ethnicity mentors, in senior positions, are ideally positioned to provide psychosocial and sponsorship mentoring however displays of micro-aggression or acts of disassociation can disrupt these mentoring relationships. This study recommends all mentors need to be equipped to manage the complex relationship which exists within these mentoring dyads.

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