

Group support for transformational social work education: a study of the Black Academics Forum (BAF)

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Abstract: The importance of formal and informal support for professional social workers cannot be overemphasised and this is true for social work academics who view themselves as belonging to minority groups. This paper outlines the development of the Black Academics Forum (BAF) within the Division of Social Work at the University of Northampton as a strategy to transform social work education for students, its members and ultimately for users of social work services. The benefits of BAF are considered within the context of feeling ‘lost inside space’ and providing a forum to self define whilst drawing upon the values of belonging, acceptance and trust. The challenges and limitations are considered alongside aspirations for the future of the group.

Introduction

If you have to think about belonging, perhaps you are already outside. (Probyn, 1996, p. 8)

This reflective yet critical paper outlines the collective and individual experiences of four Black social work academics and their encounters with the wider complexities of higher education institutions (HEIs), which resulted in the formation of the Black Academics Forum (BAF). It argues in favour of identity-based networks whilst acknowledging the challenges that such groups may experience. The paper begins by outlining the background to the establishment of the group, followed by an examination of the concept of Black empowerment. The paper then considers the synergies between BAF and the existing BME student support group (Padare) and draws upon the MANDELA model as a useful framework guiding the groups’ interactions. The role of modern communication strategies is examined, benefits and challenges presented and finally BAF members’ personal narratives shared. The paper concludes with a

reiteration of the usefulness of the BAF group.

Bell et al (2011) have argued that identity-based networks can play a role in facilitating voice from minority groups as well as contributing to an institution's equality and diversity strategy. Berg and Simon (2013) claim that this has the potential to foster cohesion, whilst promoting Black identity through honesty, non-defensiveness and openness which facilitate self-awareness a crucial requirement for group formation processes.

Background to the Black Academics Forum

The formation of this Black Academics Forum (BAF) can be directly credited to a suggestion by our line manager, who proposed establishing a formal group for black and ethnic minority staff in recognition of the growing numbers of staff and students from BME backgrounds within the Division of Social Work. Whilst a group existed for BME students (Bartoli et al, 2008; Bartoli, 2013) a similar group for staff across the university was conspicuous by its absence. Following a period of consultation regarding the value or otherwise of such a group, a consensus was reached to set up an 'informal' group.

The opening quote very much captures the essence of BAF and is a particularly useful reference point as it allows some consideration of the ways in which individual subjectivities are shaped by historical and everyday practices which can impact on one's notion of belonging. Alongside this of course, individual experience manipulated and defined by dominant discourse about who is valued, lends itself to the articulation of who feels a sense of belonging and who feels excluded (Brah, 1996). Thus it remains significant to analyse and understand the ways in which power permeates every part of one's existence and the silent ways in which it manifests itself in shaping identities and experiences according to where one is positioned. Therefore an exploration of concepts of belonging, acceptance and trust (Matoo, 2013) serves to promote a broader understanding of groupwork dynamics, which prove to be significant variables in the analysis of oppression and discrimination, and how they intersect with group membership and facilitation.

Whilst this paper takes a strong Black empowerment perspective, it is also important to recognise the theoretical knowledge base of groupwork itself. Although many definitions of groupwork exist, Doel provides an effective definition in relation to social work practice:

Groupwork refers to a method of social work practice which is concerned with the recognition and use of processes which occur when three or more people work together towards a common purpose. The term groupwork is also used to describe a context for practice, where social work practice is conducted in groups. (Doel, 2000, p. 148)

With this in mind, it is recognised that whilst a diverse range of theories exist to analyse group processes, the conceptualisation of Tuckman's (1965) theory has been particularly helpful as it provides an interesting framework to explore the ways in which BAF has evolved, namely through the four stages of forming, storming, norming and performing. The fifth stage, mourning can only be addressed when the group is dissolved and is currently not relevant to this paper.

The key stages of the groupwork process (Tuckman, 1965) were achieved as follows:

- **Forming:** the coming together of individuals to form the group. This was the most prolonged of all the stages as members were consulted regularly by email about whether or not they wanted to be part of BAF. The group was agreeable to the concept of a support group but took well over five months to actually come together as a group. This can be attributed to many reasons with the most crucial being that in order to utilise the creative energy and resources of the group, members needed to feel liberated by management to do so (Benson, 2010). Discussions amongst group members were indicative of uncertainty of the group's longer term support from management, although this had been assured to them.
- **Storming:** the discussions, disagreements, agreements about the purpose of the group, its statement of purpose, membership and confidentiality went on for a while and it could be argued that

each member wanted their perspective to be taken into account from the outset, resulting in negotiation. This type of situation, according to Seck and Helton (2014) is viewed as good practice when forming groups. One group member felt that the group could be promoted within the wider School for the collective strength in numbers (Benson, 2010) to effect change. However, the other members negotiated the value of a discipline and profession specific group at least in its initial stages for both practical and pedagogic reasons. It was important during this stage for members to feel a sense of cohesion and team working to foster the group's identity (Zayed and Kamel, 2005).

- Norming: This stage saw the coming together as a co-ordinated unit once issues in the storming stage had been resolved. BAF agreed the frequency and timing of meetings as well as roles and responsibilities. It was agreed that any member could propose ad-hoc meetings as and when needed to maintain the group's currency and promote emotional support and social well-being of its members between scheduled meeting dates (Inouhe, 2015).
- Performing: BAF is currently functioning well, supporting the organisation of activities and has agreed a number of scholarly activities, this paper being the first collaborative piece. The group continues to generate psychological well-being for its members when faced with challenges and provides mediation for group members, especially, as identified by the newest member of the group (Inouhe, 2015).

A key concern for the members of this group centred on how we would be perceived and what would guide our continued existence. We were clear on what we wanted to achieve, at the same time recognising the diversity within the membership.

The group started off with five members, however at the time of writing, membership had reduced to four, a number which is considered to be small enough to ensure that every member's voice is heard and contributions respected. Gitterman (2005) has suggested that although groupwork has many goals, including minimising isolation and improving support and hope, it can also be a safe space for self- reflection, skills and career development. The group meets formally once a term and notes are

taken. There are key items on the standing agenda and information, knowledge, strategies are shared and respected by members of the group. According to Trevithick (2005), there are a number of factors that contribute to synergy within groups and they are: the ability to correct one another's mistakes, contribute to problem-solving, sharing ideas and accomplishing work that is perhaps too large for any one individual.

Self-determination and Black empowerment

Different models of Black Empowerment (Solomon, 1976), which are rooted in anti-colonialism and critical social theory (Hall, 2000) have influenced the work of our group. Recognising our personal differences and how these have shaped the intersectional nature of our professional identities has been an important starting point for our group discussions and informal meetings as peers. We come from very different socio-economic backgrounds and sites of privilege associated with gender, class and cultural power. However, our decision to come together has been driven by person-centred values grounded in co-operative ideals, corporate responsibility and a humanistic desire to collectively support one another in our individual transitions and aspirations, whilst simultaneously working together to enhance our understanding of emancipatory pedagogy and transformational learning (Freire, 1970).

Our groupwork has been underpinned by Black Perspectives and the use of a capital letter 'B' in the naming of our group denotes the term as a proper noun, to identify a politically defined group which has been visibly and politically racialised as the 'other', rather than the term implying an adjective based on skin colour (Banks, 1999; Mirza, 2003). Our group is composed of Asian and African educators from Ghana, Zimbabwe and India who are situated in a range of identity making situations and contexts which are reflective of our different histories, faith backgrounds, gender, sexualities and class positions. However as academics, we have focused on our shared experience of colour based discrimination and institutional racism to consciously name ourselves as Black academics. Irrespective of our different shades of colour we have collectively experienced the whiteness of the academy and institutional life as 'outsiders' who are sometimes perceived as being out of place and not belonging in the academy. Therefore drawing upon the term 'Black' rather

than coloured enables us to develop a politically charged critical perspective which allows us to make sense of our everyday experiences of racism and the normativity of whiteness/white privilege.

The term 'Black' academics is therefore a reflection of a particular shared experience and a construction of solidarity and unity around those experiences (Brah, 2005). These shared experiences of living and working in the United Kingdom relate to a common history of colonialism and a collective memory of the British Empire; the existence of immigration and nationality legislation; and grounded experiences of racial discrimination (Goldstein, 2008). Ahmad has suggested that a 'Black perspective' is a symbol of Black resistance and Black empowerment, and states that:

The circumstances that shape a Black perspective stem from the experience of racism and powerlessness, both past and present. The motivation that energises a Black perspective is rooted to the principle of racial equality and justice. The articulation that voices a Black perspective is part of a process that is committed to replacing the white distortion of Black reality with Black writings of Black experience. (Ahmad, 1990, p. 3)

Black Perspectives have also enabled our group to legitimise alternative ways of knowing, which Graham (2007) refers to as 'Afrocentricity'. These alternative ways of knowing have been important for unpacking the normativity of white identity and the power associated with whiteness and white privilege which is institutionalised and played out in the actions and outcomes of organisations (Macpherson, 1999). These alternative ways of knowing for members of BAF relate to teaching and learning strategies as well as research and scholarly output that can enrich students' learning and enable us to challenge the erasure of 'race' in British public policy and the suggestion that we live in a post - race society.

BAF has been important for transformational learning; the critical space it provides us with as educators has been important for developing criticality, collective dialogue and shared understandings, which have enabled us to speak with confidence and 'voice' our everyday experiences of institutional racism. Being members of our group has also enabled us to

challenge the invisibility of 'race' in institutional life (Ahmed, 2012). These challenges have involved taking risks and developing anti-racist perspectives which have a valuable and transformative role in social work education (Singh and Cowden, 2010). These perspectives can be evidenced in our collective work in Padare (the student support group referred to in the introduction) which empowers our Black students to identify and name racism (Goldstein, 2008) and in our work as academics, which seeks to raise awareness of racial inequalities and the processes associated with racial oppression, racial marginalisation and racial exclusion (Bhatti-Sinclair, 2011).

Synergies with PADARE and MANDELA

It is worth noting that all members of BAF recognise that they are part of a bigger group: the Division of Social Work. Teams are much neglected and often not acknowledged as 'groups' (Doel and Shardlow, 2005) however the issue of identifying oneself within each group helps to sustain a sense of belonging. Bryan (2001) tells us that individual experiences have a role to play in informing the position one assumes in society. Hence, BAF provides a supportive role in being able to build upon the individual experiences and narratives of the black academic staff participating in the group with the ultimate aim of promoting itself as able to contribute effectively to decision making within the bigger group – the social work team. Bryan (2001) posits that black professionals require an additional layer of support from each other in response to the key problems they are all likely to encounter individually in white organisations.

This resonates with key aspects leading to the development of PADARE, a support group for black African social work students at the University of Northampton (UN). PADARE was formed in 2008 following the work of three academics who identified through their research that African students on the social work programme appeared to experience more difficulties academically and on their practice learning opportunities than other students on the course (Bartoli et al, 2008; Bartoli, 2013). The term 'PADARE' hails from the Shona language of Zimbabwe and means a meeting place where ideas are generated and exchanged (Bartoli, 2013). A key feature of this term is a solution-focused methodology.

This bears specific relevance to the role and purpose of BAF. Through sharing ideas, teaching and learning strategies, giving emotional support to each other and working together to develop pedagogic practice that will benefit and improve upon the student experience, BAF also aims to improve the personal effectiveness of its members. Therefore there is acknowledgement that the support available for students is also necessary for members of BAF. Bhopal (2014) suggests that the dynamics of power within academia are centred on a White elite group of senior management staff who ultimately understand and consequently seek to promote their own backgrounds and world views. Hence, the visibility of BAF members can be promoted through engagement with divisional, institutional and national processes which are crucial to transforming our teaching and learning strategies.

The support of line management is a crucial factor for setting up and maintaining a group such as BAF due to the acknowledgement of the need for a group for BME staff similar to what exists for BME students to enable them navigate their way in the White space of academia. One of the primary drivers in setting up PADARE was students in the focus group reporting that they felt constrained and prevented from achieving (Bartoli et al, 2008). Bhopal (2014) echoes this view and highlights the finding that BME academics who participated in her research discussed slower career progression and attainment of desired outcomes for their self-actualisation process as contending academics. BAF members use the forum to work towards achieving best practice in teaching and learning and thereby contribute to this self-actualisation process.

Pedagogically, groupwork involves a space to promote learning in a variety of ways. Given social work courses promote groupwork to develop student self-awareness across a range of skills, the space it occupies also needs to lend itself to promoting belonging and acceptance for its members. Although it can be argued that groupwork might create a sense of belonging, acceptance and trust, group membership also goes beyond the confines of the allocated space and time which groups share (Coulshed and Orme, 2006). Whilst the commonality of groupwork arguably promotes a sense of working together to some common goal or purpose, within this relationship there also needs to be some form of commitment and loyalty for its members (Coulshed and Orme, 2006). This can arise out

of the interactions which take place 'inside' the group, but fundamentally it is those interactions which take place 'outside' of the group which tend to promote feelings of isolation and non-acceptance.

Adopting the MANDELA model of practice (Tendam, 2012), BAF members have and will continue to **M**ake time to meet regularly to update, support and agree on structured ways forward for BAF group members; **A**cknowledge the **N**eeds of individual members and the group as a collective; take note of the **D**ifferences as well as similarities in individual and collective experiences and evaluate these to benefit group members; consider **E**ducational support needs and experiences for member academics; and take account of **L**ife experiences and how they impact on the learning and teaching support members require for themselves and to improve performance as academics. Finally, considerations of **A**ge and the different areas of expertise members bring along to the forum are fostered and consequently explored as a group. Nelson Mandela, the man himself, symbolised tenacity, determination, peace, hope and ultimately success among other things to many who knew the name. It is safe to infer that BAF group members maintain an allegiance to the values MANDELA represents and certainly these values are consistent with BAF's role and purpose. This approach also forms an example of how group members can also use the group to promote each other's work, as the MANDELA practice framework and the well-being strategy were developed by group members.

Brown and Mistry (2006) have identified a number of features of anti-oppressive groupwork focusing on the context of the agency, group structure and composition, and a sound preparatory stage (incorporating the location and access of the group, anti-oppressive principles and ground rules, reflecting all members' cultural perspectives and interests). These features correspond to the stages discussed within the MANDELA model (Tendam, 2012). The model has enabled us to acknowledge that our experiences within the academy differ along gendered lines and this awareness requires the adoption of different strategies in trying to navigate interpersonal and organisational barriers to progression (Vakalahi and Starks, 2010).

Importance of communication and modern technology

Every group requires a mode of communication which can boost its effectiveness and sustain members' interest and participation. A discussion forum was set up on WhatsApp to facilitate the sharing and exchange of information outside the workplace. Members who are attending conferences or external meetings can share their experiences on this forum. The nature of the forum means that it is a continuous 'dialogue' and participants do not need to be online at the time of the discussion. They can log on and respond as appropriate, to questions or comments posted earlier. Relevant TV and radio programmes, for example, can be highlighted to colleagues through this forum as can easy questions such as 'Has anyone got a copy of XXXX book?' One could argue that this level of interaction can and should be maintained with other colleagues. However, as with all closed groups, there are criteria for inclusion. This WhatsApp group is for members of BAF only.

Bouhnik and Deshen (2014) have argued that mobile phone applications such as WhatsApp can transform the way we teach and learn, and also promote collaboration through enhanced communication, particularly within groups. WhatsApp's functionality includes text messaging, teleconferencing facilities, images, video and audio files as well as links to websites. BAF had considered the use of other social media such as Twitter and Facebook but quickly recognised that not all members were supportive of those platforms, nor did these two offer the level of privacy required. Once members had agreed to proceed with WhatsApp, the setting up of the group took less than ten minutes. Whilst this process highlights the speed with which groups evolve online, one member of BAF remained uncomfortable with the use of WhatsApp. However, with support and encouragement from group members, the acceptance of WhatsApp as a means of effective communication for BAF has been embraced and has proved to be effective.

The use of email within the group is reserved for the sharing and circulation of large documents, reports and files, which is difficult to do through WhatsApp. The screen shot (figure 1) is an example of one of the ways WhatsApp is used within the BAF group. This message and web link can be easily accessed by the forum. Its content may generate or stimulate

discussions which can then be used within lectures and seminars. The screen shot is an example of how WhatsApp is used by members of BAF.

Group aspirations

As a group of Black academics we have positioned BAF to promote anti-racist praxis (Singh and Cowden, 2010) and develop what Pierre Bourdieu has characterised as a form of 'committed scholarship' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 44). This sense of 'committed scholarship' has been evidenced by our ongoing academic work which has attempted to keep our contributions grounded in the struggles and experiences of Britain's Black communities and the realities of the African and Asian service users/students we work with. Our decision to come together as Black workers is against a public policy backdrop which has promoted the pervasive spread of populist and state-sanctioned counter-narratives to multiculturalism which have isolated anti-racist practice 'as the politically correct fetish of a minority of zealots within social work' (Husband, 2007, p. 13), and the assimilationist drift in British 'race' relations policy which has minimalised and downplayed 'race' issues in public policy (Bloch et al, 2013). This context is important for recognising how the Black Academic Forum is working against the general direction of travel in British public policy which has sought to minimise and downplay the entrenched and systematic experiences of racial disadvantage. This is despite research data which continues to suggest that, despite the best efforts of 'race' legislation and 'race' equality policies, 'most minority groups, and women in particular' continue to experience 'marginalisation, exclusion and disadvantage' (Craig et al, 2012, p. 248) and that these 'deep and entrenched inequalities' are exacerbated by everyday experiences of racism (Bloch and Solomos, 2010).

Williams (2011) suggests that, despite the proclamations in public policy, that we now live in a post 'race' society, 'the reality is that racial disadvantage is pernicious, deep-seated and enduring' (Williams, 2011, p. 60), and Graig (2013) suggests that, at a time when the dimension of 'race' is being regarded as irrelevant in public policy, 'racial inequalities are deepening', ethnic minority groups are being hardest hit by public expenditure cuts and the problem of 'structural racism' has yet to be confronted (Graig, 2013, pp. 6 and 8).

Seeking to extend the research and publications profile of its members, BAF provides a forum for the dissemination of research and scholarly ideas. It is not uncommon to find that research around issues of race, ethnicity and racism is undervalued and avoided (Bhopal and Jackson, 2013). For this reason BAF members schedule in discussions about their individual research as part of their meetings and are open to challenge, constructive criticism and support from colleagues. Group member's research interests include: gender and sexuality, emancipatory theories, anti-racism in social work education and practice and the impact of Race on inter-professional education. Some of this work has been published or presented at conferences and seminars and members continue to seek opportunities to disseminate this work more widely.

Members 'speak': Benefits of BAF

Pedagogically, groupwork involves a space to promote learning across a range of spectrums. This section amplifies the 'voices' of BAF members in relation to how they experience BAF in terms of its benefits for its members and students.

One member explains:

As a fairly new member who joined the social work team in September 2013, the support of other BME colleagues has been fundamental in helping me develop a sense of identity and belonging within the wider team. This was achieved through discussing openly our shared experiences of discrimination outside of the work environment and devising strategies of how to disseminate these experiences into learning for incorporation into my teaching around AOP, ADP and ARP. As Benson (2010) says, shared experiences, beliefs, values and areas of common interest are grounding elements for establishing effective working relationships.

Another shares the view that:

Without doubt my self-identity is bolstered by the support of

the Black Academics Forum – a space which creates feelings of being on the ‘inside’, a place where we as a group can work towards interrupting forced constructions of ourselves within the academy (Higher Education Institutions), a space grounded in belonging.

For a third member, coming to terms with racism in higher education had devastating, longer-term effects, articulated thus:

In 2012, I was experiencing one of the most difficult periods of my career and was beginning to accept that racism was here to stay and that working in an institution of learning did not guarantee protection from racist attitudes from people I perceived as intellectuals of high standing. A student came to see me about her placement experiences, explaining that she felt discriminated against and thought that what she was experiencing was racism. I emphatically told her to ‘get real and live with it as we all do’ because I was experiencing similar. Once this student had left, I began to feel a sense of guilt and disappointment in myself. Why had I dismissed that student? Why had I seemingly ‘run out’ of strategies? Why did I tell her to ‘get real and live with it as we all do’? I felt angry and disappointed with myself – it was then that I realised that whilst the students had me and other colleagues for support, I had no one. Who could I speak to? Where could I ‘offload’? Despite best intentions, it is impossible for someone who has not experienced racism to fully understand the emotional and psychological impact on its victim and whilst there are a host of ‘isms’ which affect a range of people, experiences of racism can be misunderstood, avoided, ignored, disbelieved or minimised. It is for these reasons that the formation of this group became a priority. It provides a safe space to celebrate its members’ achievements and an even safer space when one is feeling overwhelmed.

Finally, the view that BAF has provided opportunities to extend and strengthen relationships whilst being aware of the potential for conflict is captured succinctly by a fourth member thus:

Although we have gone beyond collegiate and formed deeper relationships with each other, we have still had to recognise and reflect upon how our different organisational roles are vested with dissimilar degrees of power and how our respective leadership roles can sometimes strain our groupwork relationships which simply do not exist in a hermeneutically sealed bubble. Our relationships outside of our group are bounded in hierarchical and organisational performativity cultures which sometimes bring us into conflict.

The use of racial dialogues (Miller and Donner, 2008, p. 34) offers opportunities for black academics to examine who they are in relation to their colleagues and students. Racial dialogues are 'structured conversations that encourage expressing one's self and listening to others talk about race and racism [in an] open, honest way [which should result in] improved understanding and cooperation between groups' (Miller and Donner, 2008, p. 34). BAF provides the space to 'rehearse' these dialogues for content and context appropriateness prior to them being drawn upon to aid teaching in the classroom with students.

Challenges

Like any group, the membership of BAF is not homogeneous. Whilst members self-define as 'Black', our ages, gender, experiences, backgrounds and professional roles provide us with diversity and do not guarantee immunity from challenges or difficulties. Our first major challenge as a group was to agree a statement of purpose, which we finally agreed as:

a collective of Black academics who through informal and formal methods aim to support and encourage the development of sound pedagogic practice and sharing of ideas to enhance personal effectiveness and improve the student experience.

Our ultimate aim as academics is to strive to enhance the student experience through our own personal effectiveness as teachers, assessors,

personal tutors, dissertation supervisors, placement tutors and a range of other roles and responsibilities we hold and undertake. Personal effectiveness will be achieved through enhancing our own CPD and scholarly activity, turning unpleasant and unfortunate experiences into learning opportunities and expanding our networks within and outside the Academy.

Another challenge for BAF is around whether or not to retain it as an 'informal' support group or to consider formalising it in order to directly influence divisional and institutional policies and procedures. A third challenge is deciding whether or not to extend the group by inviting membership from Black colleagues from across the university. Discussions about these two issues are ongoing, with BAF members expressing differing views. On the one hand, the expansion of the group is likely to create the critical mass required to influence institutional policy and practice. However, members are concerned about enabling confidentiality within the group, which is important if its members wish to promote personal disclosure (Olivier, 2009).

Mentoring and BAF

According to Turner et al (2008), the value of mentoring for Black staff in higher education is well documented. A formal mentoring arrangement exists between two members, initiated and supported by our line manager. Mentoring is a powerful and empowering tool – if used appropriately. Whilst it has the ability to motivate, inspire and develop learning, this is highly dependent upon the relationship between the mentor and mentee. As such, the importance of developing a confidential and informal space to discuss, disseminate and challenge will depend upon the ways in which the mentor ultimately guides the relationship (Brown, 2009). Ideally, the mentor should be steering personal development, growth and learning. However, it should be noted that mentoring also has the ability and capacity to cultivate and instil a sense of insecurity where micro-aggressions (Sue, 2005) manipulate and relegate the mentee to a position of the Other. As Brah (1996) asserts, the existence of power relations helps maintain those in power to define Others and impose identities. Undoubtedly, whilst individual subjectivities have shaped the contours of the mentors' understanding and enabled the development of

her role as mentor, engagement within such complex processes continues to rely on similarities of experience and shared identities as black women within the academy. Although such commonalities have no doubt promoted a sense of trust, it appears the conceptualisation of mentoring is also grounded in hierarchical relations where elements of suspicion and lack of trust have also impinged on levels of engagement. As with group processes, the wellbeing strategy (Matoo, 2013) has played an integral part in forming trusting relationships and continues to provide the backdrop to promote a sense of wellbeing for newly appointed staff. For this newly appointed member of staff, reflections on how her experience might have been different had she been appointed a white colleague as a mentor led her to conclude that overall, the consequences of having a Black mentor were beneficial and critical. An effective mentor serves to foster and encourage inclusive working practices and equal opportunities for their mentee in the work environment (Merriam-Webster, 2012). This helps promote growth and development in the skills of the mentee. An effective mentoring relationship also provides an opportunity for both parties to learn from each other.

The mentee reflects on the likelihood of having more to contribute to Black colleagues and acknowledges research by Lutz et al (2013) which suggests that Black academics who are also new to academia utilise a range of coping strategies – including distancing themselves, fitting in and proving their worth – and conclude that the likelihood of white colleagues in the division learning from her as a new and junior member of the team are limited. This can perhaps be attributed expressly to white colleagues' lack of direct experience of racial discrimination and unconscious bias. The existence of experiences which are shared in a relationship enables trusting relationships to develop because there is likely to be mutual understanding from those shared experiences (Connor and Pokora, 2012). Working from the baseline where there were similarities in experiences of this type of discrimination accelerated the development of a trusting relationship due to feeling safe to share these experiences with someone who understands how challenging it remains to navigate in a 'white arena'. Whilst this has not been the experience of the authors, research by Bhopal and Jackson (2013) indicates that a BAF perspective on the support needed as a black female academic could be misunderstood as incapability to do the job.

The BAF well-being model seeks to offer a more nuanced analysis of emotion and feeling within the context of groupwork dynamics and relationships and also plays an instrumental role in recognising the ways in which 'race' and gender intersect to construct and impose identities. Whilst one could argue the armoury of such powerful constructs remains impenetrable, the well-being model remains significant in providing a platform to analyse and understand the ways in which such power permeates into every part of one's existence and the silent ways in which it manifests itself. As Mirza (2009) highlights, whiteness is described as ...'a powerful place that makes invisible, or re-appropriates things, people and places it does not want to see or hear' (Mirza, 2009, p. 3). With this in mind, the model is strategically juxtaposed not only as an entry point to cultivate a 'safe' space to discuss experiences of misappropriation and invisibility within the academy but positions members to nurture and celebrate achievements and ideas to enhance teaching, research and scholarly activity. As an 'insider' the BAF well-being model is a powerful resource where trust, acceptance and belonging are implicit in the process of promoting change.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations have emerged from undertaking this collaborative piece of work both in terms of areas for future research and for the BAF itself.

- Promote BAF as a resource to support black academic staff wellbeing
- Continue to disseminate good pedagogic practice arising from BAF
- Share opportunities for career development, progression and enhancement
- Promote BAF as a resource which encourages joint and individual research and scholarly activity.

Limitations

BAF currently has restricted membership which is open only to social work academics. The group will however need to carefully consider widening

participation by offering BAF as a resource to black academics across the University. This will of course require careful planning to avoid any dilution of the wellbeing model where members still feel part of a group where trust, acceptance and belonging are implicitly respected and promoted. There is also the potential to use BAF as an alternative to formal grievance processes and this will need to be more carefully discussed and agreed. It is lamentable that this is the case, however members are aware of the emotional energy and time that can be spent in formal processes and have consciously avoided going down this route. BAF members, like other employees seek dignity in the workplace – not patronising micro-aggressions and micro-invalidations (Sue, 2005) through commission or omission which is experienced regularly. Whilst this is considered a limitation at this time, it is hoped that it becomes a redundant concern in the future

Conclusion

This paper has presented the Black Academics Forum as an innovative and integral strategy to enhancing its member's wellbeing through fostering a sense of belonging, trust and acceptance. It has outlined the utility of groupwork processes in reducing isolation and individualism and promoting self-awareness and self-esteem by conveying a message that each member has something constructive and worthwhile to contribute (Drumm, 2008) and that their contributions can facilitate individual and collective change. It is through BAF that discussions about racism and racialised experiences can be had without feeling the need to camouflage it by calling it something else to suit the majority and it is only through being strong Black academic role models that Black students can have a higher education experience which is welcoming, empowering, and positive in their interactions with us.

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Figure 1 BME Academics Forum on WhatsApp

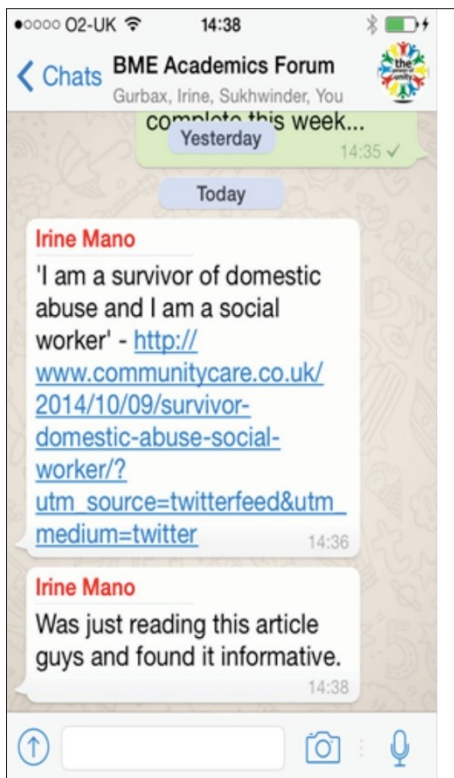


Figure 2 BAF wellbeing strategy (Matoo, unpublished)

