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Diversity in mentoring: A case of women of African origin in the UK

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Abstract

Ongoing global tensions ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic, economic uncertainties, civil unrests around racial clashes resulting in deaths, and the re-examination of unresolved historical occurrences, has led to the need to focus even more on issues concerning inclusion and diversity at the global, national and organisational levels. Therefore, this paper explores the concept of mentoring for women of African origin. It draws on empirical evidence provided by 30 such women working in the United Kingdom (UK). The paper highlights results from their varying experiences as mentors and mentees that suggest intentional mentoring has implications for inclusion and diversity research and organisational practices.

Introduction

This paper explores how and why women of African origin within UK organisations engage with mentoring and the relevance of diversity in mentoring for career development. The paper brings together three themes – mentoring, diversity, and career advancement. We acknowledge and agree with arguments (Ely and Thomas 2001) that emphasise the relevance of diversity in the workplace. We recognise the analysis from resource-based theory that considers organisations have a variety of resources (Yang and Konrad 2011) – women employees being a part of this resource. While we see a rise in the number of women in the workplace, there are still challenges concerning women of African origin advancing to the top of managerial hierarchies.

Within the context of understanding the challenges of career development for women of African origin in the UK and the debates concerning the existence of institutional racism, we explore the role of mentoring as access for career development. We draw from research (Kram 1988, Ragins and Cotton 1999, Higgins and Kram 2001, Chandler 2011) that indicates mentoring is a career resource for employees in organisations. This involves relationships where the individuals involved are committed to providing support, formally or informally. This support can be towards career development to help facilitate advancement within the organisation or the sector, psychosocial function focusing on the emotional, interpersonal, and competence aspects that underlie the mentoring relationship, and role-modelling (Higgins and Kram 2001). Our overarching questions are: how and why do women of African origin engage in mentoring in UK organisations?

Review of the literature

In examining perspectives of mentoring, we highlight some definitions and views that have been emphasised and contextualised over the years. We draw from these views and adapt a perspective that will help illustrate the aim of the study and consequently contribute to the mentoring discourse from a diversity standpoint. Mentoring is a mutual time-based relationship that takes into consideration a comprehensive development of the mentee (Gadomska-Lila 2020). Similarly, Sulimani-Aidan (2019) highlights that mentoring is a professional role that involves individuals who typically mentor their mentees for a specified period, with the aim to promote their outcomes in different areas and compensate for a lack of appropriate role models, especially in the case of youth mentoring. Likewise, de Janasz and Godshalk (2013) review mentoring as a unique interpersonal relationship between two individuals – which could be peer-based, where the mentor is in the same position as the mentee but with more experience hence, mentors the mentee, or traditionally where the

mentor is usually in a higher position with years of experience and knowledge. In this context, the mentor would provide career-related and psychosocial support to develop a protege's career.

In addition to the career-related and psychosocial support that mentoring provides, there is evidence (Higgins and Kram 2001, Gadomska-Lila 2020) to show that mentoring does have an impact on an individual's psychological state. This impact includes the opportunity for personal and professional growth with the aim to generate satisfaction, especially taking into consideration the functional structures in mentoring and the quality of mentoring relationships. Likewise, studies (Kram 1988, Ragins and Cotton 1999, Higgins and Kram 2001, Gadomska-Lila 2020) in mentoring have also provided insights that reveal the factors that account for the cultivation of structures in mentoring that also aims to foster quality relationships. These include time-based formal or informal, voluntary, or paid role, race, gender-based or intergenerational relationships.

For instance, from an education sector perspective, mentoring looks at the formal professional development among teachers and student teachers, and the academic development among teachers and students. This covers the structuring, planning and the actual teaching to ensure that they align (Schatz-Oppenheimer 2016). In considering mentoring as a tool for development, Ghosh (2013) looked at the processes and outcomes of mentoring. She explored the disparity between mentoring in the business world and mentoring in a school setting, which was quite similar in structure but different in target and space. Ghosh (2013) reviewed the work of Merriam, who acknowledged the impact of diversity on mentoring as meaning different things across different fields or sectors, which includes formal, informal, voluntary, and paid roles, while also capturing the notion of mentoring as an intense emotional relationship contributing to adult development in all aspects of life. Similarly, Gadomska-Lila (2020) agrees that mentoring as a tool for development in the workplace can be used to support and address changing conditions and arising problems. This is because they consider the need for change in approaches to address the inevitable changes in the labour market, demographic changes, and consequent diversification of teams of employees in organisations due to circumstances like disruptions and organisational expansions and growth.

Despite the benefits and positive impacts of mentoring, this tool for development does have its challenges around the lack of or the intensity of the relationships and the functional and operational processes (Sulimani-Aidan 2019). Van Ginkel et al (2016) emphasise that good mentors apply themselves from a professional stance of collaborative inquiry into practice, where the mentor is willing to engage in mutual learning during the mentoring process. Gadomska-Lila (2020) acknowledges the relevance of such mentoring, such as reverse mentoring, especially when considering intergenerational relationships in the workplace and initiatives aimed at inclusion and diversity. Organisations are embracing reverse mentoring to solve gaps concerning generational knowledge and cultural differences. Despite the benefits of mentoring and the broad and consistent studies on mentoring, there are gaps concerning how mentoring can be an effective tool for development for women of African origin in the UK.

We use the theoretical perspective African feminism or 'womanism' to explain the positioning of women of African origin and to emphasise why their experiences are relevant to understanding the role of identities in informing development opportunities in the workplace. Womanism does not just focus on equality but on the social realities of black women and acknowledges and appreciates differences between, for instance, the needs of men and women (Sheldon 2017). We base womanism as a social theory on the history and

experiences of black women. Though some may argue it is a form of feminism, womanism encompassed the focus of feminism that questioned the male dominance concerning aspects like salary equity, gender disparity, and reproductive rights (DeLoach and Young 2015). Womanism focuses on inclusivity and the psychosocial needs of black women, which highlights the gaps in feminism discourse between the experiences of white and black women. It embodies the experiences and relationships between black women and black men in a cultural context (DeLoach and Young 2015). Consequently, it is a culturally based theory that is sensitive to the lived experiences of women of African origin. It embraces the activism of women of African origin who fought for the freedom from forms of oppression (Dove 1998), thereby creating a strong sense of resilience in the family, workplace, and society.

According to a [CIPD (2017) report](), BAME employees, particularly those from an Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi background, are more likely than a white British employee to indicate that their identity or background can influence the opportunities given to them. This indicates a gap in the discourse concerning people from black minority ethnic groups, especially women. Hence, in seeking to understand how one's identity can inform career development opportunities, we look at how mentoring as a development tool influences development opportunities for women of African origin within organisations in the UK. We draw from Higgins and Kram's (2001) notion about mentoring functions that can be focused on career functions or psychosocial functions or both.

Hence, this study supports the literature on mentoring and further explores the idea of 'intentional mentoring' that looks at implications for women of African origin drawing from the varying experiences of these women in the UK, as mentors and mentees, and suggests these implications for inclusion and diversity research and organisational practices. Consequently, this study explores mentoring in organisations and specifically focuses on race and gender perspectives as we consider mentoring for women of African origin in organisations within the UK. We adapt the view of mentoring as a mutual relationship between the mentor and mentee that takes into consideration the opportunity for personal and professional growth which generates satisfaction that aligns with targeted objectives.

Research methods

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 women to address our research questions. The interviews typically lasted for 30 minutes, and the selection method used was purposive sampling. We recruited volunteer participants from friends and acquaintances in work organisations, and from social and religious networks.

We applied thematic analysis to examine the narratives of how and why these women engage in mentoring. Using Braun and Clarke (2006), we define thematic analysis as identifying and reporting themes within data to interpret the research topic. We derived these themes by identifying critical points from the narratives, significant to addressing the research question. We applied conventions for representing prevalence in thematic analysis, using the word 'majority' to indicate the participant numbers per theme (Braun and Clarke 2006). Subsequently, we aligned the themes with mentoring outcomes from theory (Ragins and Cotton 1999, Higgins and Kram 2001).

Research findings

The participants were from several industries and employed in varying roles. Some organisations are significantly male-dominated, like the oil and gas and construction sectors, while others work in more gender-diverse contexts, such as the higher education sector. Participant roles include engineers, project managers, accountants, academics, HR professionals and administrative jobs. This mix of industry context and participant roles provides a useful range of contexts for exploring the process and functions of mentoring.

The findings include a dominant focus on psychosocial functions rather than a balanced focus on the two functions identified by Higgins and Kram (2001) and Ragins and Cotton (1999), which are the psychosocial and career functions. This suggests that identifying clear outcomes concerning mentoring, such as access to facilitate career advancement opportunities for women of African origin in the UK, is likely to be more of a challenge unless mentoring is tailored to that objective. We may relate this to an additional indication, which suggests that the role-modelling function is mainly from the experience of the participants themselves. Likewise, the psychosocial function contributes to their personal growth and professional development (Ragins and Cotton 1999). The exception to this is mentoring formally organised as part of an organisation's talent development to facilitate career advancement. This was the case for five of the participants.

An additional indication suggests that most participants perceive the existence of institutional biases, but do not necessarily conclude that racial or gender biases prevent career advancement. The mixed perception hinges on the notion that these organisations (where the participants work) have standing policies and action plans for inclusion and diversity. Nonetheless, the reality for BAME female staff indicates existing implicit barriers that affect career progression or cause delay in career progression.

There were also indications that the participants do not depend on formal organisational talent development to experience mentoring. There were mixed thoughts around the impact of formalised mentoring on talent development and career advancement, thereby suggesting gaps in workplace formalised organisational talent development for career advancement where mentoring is concerned. Consequently, the participants did indicate their involvement in more informal mentoring networks, which were mostly external to their organisations.

Practical importance and implications of research

Within the context of the findings, it is possible to say that the lack of formal role models to perform intentional career function within mentoring in organisations will have adverse effects on the career development of women of African origin. This, in turn, will mean that organisations are not able to fully exploit the talent available to them from these groups of employees, and thus do not maximise the potential for competitive advantage from their potential talent pool.

Also, the findings suggest that the participants are not wholly dependent on formal organisational mentoring support. This is perhaps a lesson for all employees in that this group of participants demonstrates the possibilities and benefits of informal mentoring organised through social, friendship and other informal networks. The findings also suggest a need for more research from an employer perspective on the pros and cons of formal and informal mentoring in the careers of women of African origin. Hence, the use of formal and informal mentoring suggests positive benefits for both employer and employees. This seems to be evident in the experience and career benefits of the women, both as mentors and

mentees within formal and informal programmes. The indication is that these women experience enhanced career development as compared with those women involved only in informal or formal mentoring programmes. This is an important consideration for employers who wish to maximise the talent of women of African origin and the associated organisational benefits.

Our recommendations include:

- Build and consistently review the structure and functionality of formal mentoring within the business structure to ensure its effectiveness.
- Increase inclusive, formalised mentoring within development programmes. This should help identify and inform the effects of diversity in mentoring and career development.
- Encourage more informal mentoring networks and find ways to link the benefits of these networks to the formalised mentoring and organisational culture.
- Create safe spaces for conversations concerning the perception/reality of the lack of inclusion, and there should be evidence of how these conversations inform practice at the organisational level.

This work explores how and why women of African origin within UK organisations engage with mentoring and the relevance of diversity in mentoring for career advancement. Drawing from the empirical evidence provided by 30 women of African origin working in the UK, this work contributes knowledge to diversity and mentoring studies as it highlights results from their varying experiences as mentors and mentees. The work suggests intentional mentoring as an implication for inclusion and diversity and career advancement in organisational practices.

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