Beyond Tokenism: Activism, Resistance and Rebellion

Abstract

The paper is written from a Black womanist lens (Walker 1982), utilising the narrative of six Black female academics in UK universities, to chart their early childhood experiences, passion for learning and their journeys of navigating academia, overcoming personal and professional obstacles. To achieve this, an adaptation of Wengraf (2004) Biographical Narrative Interview Model (BNIM) was employed alongside Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis as a foundation of the methodology for this study. Whilst the adverse issues relating to Black female academics is sadly not new, the paper is original in the way data was gathered. Namely, the academics were both the researchers and participants, therefore simultaneously providing and analysing the data. The study identified four themes that linked to the resistance, rebellion and activism demonstrated by the women which were: (1) significance of early life, (2) passion for learning, (3) overcoming obstacles, and (4) navigating academia. The paper concluded that despite the positive messaging from families and communities about pursuing education, and the need for having a strong work ethic, the progress that can be achieved by Black female academics is limited due to the pervasive nature of racism, therefore dispelling the myth of meritocracy.

Keywords: Black, Women, Activism, Racism, Resistance, Rebellion, Social Work Education, Intersectionality

Introduction

It is difficult for women (Skidmore, 2019; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017; Acker, 1992; Bhopal & Jackson 2015) of any ethnicity in a patriarchal structure to progress in their chosen career. For Black, female academics the endeavour is more challenging (Okoya, 2022; Asare, 2022; Osho et al., 2019; Ali, 2016), due to the interrelation between gender and racial oppression (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008). In relation to UK universities their infrastructure is founded on the social construction of whiteness being superior and neutral, marginalising Black women academics, thereby hindering their progression (Frankenberg, 1993; Wright et al., 2000). Furnham (2021) states that the subjective process of progression in academia is influenced by elitism and is driven by institutional financial priorities. In addition, Rollick's (2019) study of 20 Black female professors across the various disciplines in the UK talks to the injustices of poorly implemented policies, citing 'passive bullying' and 'racial microaggressions' (p.35).'

Despite academic and professional success (Asare, 2022), Black academics experience undermining, being overworked (Rabelo et al., 2020), refuting of their research findings and other forms of

microaggression in the working environment. This discrimination towards Black women permeates society, often resulting in cautious navigation and negotiation to survive (Rockquemore and Laszloffy, 2008).

The researchers, are all qualified social workers whose personal and professional paths have led to a career in academia. Like Burke et al. (2000) and Dade et al (2015) their backgrounds in practice and lived experience provide an insight into the impact of racism in the lives of Black women seeking to forge a career in academia. Despite copious research findings relating to racial and gender inequalities produced over decades (Bunting, 2004), the UK still only has two Black female social work professors; Claudia Barnard Adele Jones and Prospero Tedam; a highlight of the entrenched issues of inequality and underrepresentation in academia (Wright, Thompson and Channer, 2007). This is mirrored in the findings of Vassar and Barnet III (2020) US study, who employ a critical race theory to understand the need to apply theories of race and racism in understanding the experiences of Black women in academia, which is in keeping with this research. Social Work seeks to promote social justice for the oppressed; the paper therefore highlights the circumstances and working conditions at universities for Black female academics to add to the body of knowledge that could facilitate necessary change. For the purposes of this paper, we are using Black interchangeably with African and African-Caribbean.

Research Aim

The aim of this research was to use the narratives of six Black Social Work academics to gain an understanding of the strategies they use, namely activism, rebellion and resistance to navigate their life before and during their employment in Higher Education.

Methodology

A creative qualitative methodology was formulated as a form of activism to challenge the colonised curriculum and demonstrate that Black people are capable of contributing to knowledge (Kanu 2007). Embracing Sharpe's recommendations, to honour our African and African-Caribbean heritage, a narrative life history approach using spoken language to transfer knowledge was chosen, recognising the maintaining of such traditions as a legitimate body of research (Riessman, 2008 and Wells, 2011). Narrative, along with Riessman's (2008) ideas on thematic analysis emphasises that the content of 'what' is 'told' is more important than 'how' it is said.

An adaptation of Wengraf (2004) Biographical Narrative Interview Model (BNIM) was used to achieve the creative methodology. BNIM uses a distinctive interviewing method to draw out the uninterrupted

narratives of interviewees. The analytic aspect of the formulaic - 9 stage approach, enables the scrutinising of the interview and transcript cases, with a tenth stage to cross-case analysis. Stage 1 sub-section 2 of the model is conducive to our insider researcher position that enables the researcher to probe the interviewee regarding particular incident narratives (PIN's). The BNIM method empowers participants to articulate the intricacies of their life journeys and experiences providing a framework for data analysis and interpretation as it provides both a current and historical perspective, thereby leading to an understanding of the personal experiences, life-histories and lived situations of the women involved. The researchers used BNIM to undertake semi-structured interviews that enable the interviewee to recount their story. Utilising BNIM allowed the researchers to capturing the complexities of individual experiences and analyse each others stories, from early childhood influences to professional milestones and challenges faced in their career. The technique begins by asking a single open question which Wengraf (2004) calls a 'SQUIN' (Single Question Aimed at Inducing Narrative). The SQUIN was

'I'm researching the lives of Black, female, Social Work, Senior Lecturers working in the UK. Can you please tell me the story of your life, up to now, including lecturing in UK universities. All those events and experiences that were important for you, personally.'

Similarly, to Burke et al. (2000), who talk to a 'reflective and reflexive' account this article uses the process of sharing our common experiences' (p.297), gathering data through interviewing one another to explore the complexity, ambiguity, and nuances of the experiences of Black women in academia which is comparable with Dade et al., (2015). This is in recognition that intersectional identity influences academic careers (Crenshaw, 1989). Each narrative was analysed individually and collectively through cross-case theorisation by exploring the similarities and differences between them, followed by identifying emerging thematic Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify patterns in meaning across the data before writing up the three case studies.

Reflexivity

The case studies that inform the paper portray the personal values and professional experiences of the researchers. The researchers acknowledge their insider position (Breen, 2007, Bryman, 2012) that produces epistemological privilege when collecting and analysing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Brett & Wheeler, 2022), believing that lived experience produces expertise and authority to speak on the subject (Spivak, 1988). We note and credit it as a strength that this position influences the collection and subsequent analysis of the data. Thus, we invite the reader to embrace our methodology and suspend doubt, by practising professional curiosity and cultural humility.

The state of knowledge from a Womanist Standpoint

As a result of the limited and developing body of UK-based research, the literature on this topic relies primarily upon references originating from the United States. Nonetheless there are shared themes and experiences related to racism in both the UK and the US. To further understand the experiences of Black women in academia, parallels can be drawn from concepts devised in other professions.

Standpoint theory, introduced in 1986 by the Marxist feminist Sandra Harding, suggests knowledge is influenced by social positions, exploring how material, political, and social power dynamics shape the production of knowledge; Patricia Hill Collins later expanded this theory to examine the perspective of African American women, emphasising the intersection of race, gender, and class. Crenshaw (1989) subsequently foregrounded intersectionality theory examining how multiple forms of discrimination like race, gender, and class intersect, creating unique experiences of marginalisation. For Black women academics in predominantly white higher education institutions, this can lead to compounded discrimination. Expanding on this, Bailey (2010) termed Misogynoir, the unique racial marginalisation and sexist violence towards Black women due to them simultaneously being oppressed on grounds of the interlocking of race and gender. Thus, institutions need to adopt a holistic approach to equity to address the intersecting barriers they face in academia (Weekes, 2023). Sharpe (2016) and Okoya (2022) like Bailey, cite the hypervisibility and invisibility of the lives of Black women which can be seen throughout this paper. Saunders (2005) warns that the strategies used in the promotion and grading within universities prevent Black women from progressing ‘smashing the ivory ceiling’.

Collins (1996) and Young’s (2000) definition of "womanism" and ‘womanhood’ highlight the unique experiences and challenges faced by Black women in academic environments. Womanism is a philosophy that contrasts Black and White women's experiences, focusing on the unique histories, cultural backgrounds and distinctive standpoint of the former; a contrast to traditional feminism. Womanism addresses systemic racism, gender discrimination, and unequal career advancement opportunities. Womanism encourages solidarity and resilience among Black female academics, advocates for equitable hiring practices, inclusive work environments, and supportive networks to navigate the complexities of race and gender in academia. Sharpe (2016) calls for an adoption of more creative research practices. Here she encourages Black academics and researchers to think outside the box to expose lived experiences impacted by race, gender, and violence (Sharpe, 2016) which the researchers have done.

The researchers chart their experiences, seeking to illuminate their resistance through regular and daily acts of opposing or pushing back against individuals and the university structures (Parrington, 2021). Their rebellion is reinforced through more organised and specific forms of protest and resistance against authorities that continue to oppress, due to injustice, disturbing the daily order (Parrington, 2021), whilst implementing the African philosophical concept of Ubuntu. Tutu conceptualises Ubuntu as, 'I am human because I belong, I participate, I share', the philosophy that 'I am because we are,' embracing the obligations of collective welfare and recognising that an individuals and a community's collective well being are both inherently tied together alongside personal activism and intentional actions to bring about social or political change (Brenman & Sanchez, 2014), which is relevant for this paper in the way that the researchers united in sharing their individual experiences to evoke a collective change. This perspective facilitates a collective journey and solidarity among Black women in academia, highlighting the need to engage in meaningful activism, mentorship, and leadership, driven by a commitment to advancing the collective good. Ubuntu motivated the researchers in building a supportive network, mentorship, and collaborative efforts to overcome systemic barriers.

Narratives/Life Histories

Overview

AW was born in 1965 to a mother who had migrated to the UK from Barbados. AW has always had a good work ethic and her leadership characteristics and skills enabled her to excel in professional roles. AW raised a family and completed her PhD whilst managing social services teams. AW never felt as though her ethnic origin impacted her professional progress until she embarked on a career in academia. Nevertheless, she embraces her mother's ethos, believing that she can achieve anything, thus, continuing to excel in her role as a senior lecturer and being committed to contributing her skills and knowledge to the landscape of social work education.

SW was born in 1984, in the UK. She was an only child, raised by a single mother who was greatly supported by her extended family. SW speaks of her mother as a positive influence on her educational journey, as she was keen for her to attend the best schools. SW's developed advocacy skills whilst at school which were nurtured at a local youth club where she was able to campaign for local causes. It was her involvement with the youth club that opened the door to her career in youth work. SW qualified as a youth worker and a social worker before embarking on a career in academia. She is now embarking on her PhD and hopes her achievements will encourage her daughters and other young black people.

DH is in her 50's and was born in Sierra Leone, attending a UK primary school which she describes as hazy due to her negative experience. She is the middle child of a large sibling group raised by both parents, who lived in a predominantly white area in the South East of England. DH became a social work manager before moving into academia where she has held roles as a Course Lead and Professional Lead.

MRH was born in the UK in 1971 to Jamaican parents who migrated as infants. She spent her early childhood in Denmark after her parents separated, where she attended primary school. She returned aged 11, to the UK, where she and her sister received their secondary and subsequent education. MRH states that she did not receive a traditional Caribbean upbringing which she feels is attributed to having a childhood split between Denmark and the UK. Nevertheless she regularly visited Jamaica as her mother was keen for her to know about her heritage. MRH is a Head of Service in Social Services as well as a part-time academic who has mentored aspiring Black social workers.

ST was born in 1977 raised in South London. She lived with her mother and siblings and had a relationship with her father. ST's desire to understand the inequalities within her community motivated her to complete an undergraduate degree in Criminology before embarking on her MA Social Work and forging a career in child protection. ST became involved in the delivery of anti racist social work practice which led to her role as the British Association Social Workers. Anti-racist Lead. ST is currently the Clinical Professional Lead and Course Lead for Social Work course and is working on her doctoral thesis despite having a desire to be an academic but never envisaging herself in achieving it due to her humble start in life..

RN was born in Uganda in 1989, where she lived until the age of 4 along with her brother and mother until the family immigrated to the UK. RN lived in a predominantly Black area of London. Her mother remarried in the UK and she had two further sibling brothers. RN describes that due to not speaking English on arrival in the UK she was allocated a support teacher, however the need for this was short lived as she was a 'gifted and talented' child and therefore was given lots of opportunities in school to achieve. However, due to difficulties with the home RN dropped out of school after A levels and went to university as a mature student. RN works as a University Lecturer.alongside working as an Adults and Children's safeguarding lead for a large NHS trust.

Phase A: Family Life

The women were raised in nuclear, single parent and reconstituted families with close relationships with extended families even when migration to the UK occurred. Their parents placed a premium on good education and sought school provisions that they deemed would provide an outstanding education; they were undeterred by locality. The participants credited much of their motivation to achieve to support and expectations of their families and their role as a mother.

SW, ST and RN lived in predominantly African and Caribbean communities which were labelled as deprived albeit in different parts of the UK. These areas had negative reputations, with high rates of unemployment and crime. Subsequently, children from those areas were stigmatised and there was little to no expectation from wider society for them to excel academically especially in their education institutes. MRH also lived in a Caribbean community on return from Denmark but her mum soon relocated to a predominantly white area to avoid the impact of living in a marginalised area and to be closer to good performing schools. DH was raised in a majority white area, where AW was raised in a more multicultural area of London.

DH: '…I come from a family where education is highly esteemed. My grandfather, my great grandfather, you know, went to university…So there was never any doubt in our mind or in their mind that we were going to take an academic route.'

SW:'…I remember going to a primary school and my mum not being happy with the progress I was making…she wanted me to do well…I knew from home life that education was an important thing.'

MRH: …one of the reasons that we came back to the UK is because my mum was worried about our education, so education was always really important…'

RN: 'My granddad was in education, so he taught my mom and her sisters the benefits of education and they used to drum that into us as well. '

AW: 'My mom wanted me to go to a grammar school but I just met friends and so I didn't wanna lose those friends and go to a different school…

Phase B: Education

Some of the women loved their compulsory school years. AW recalled emulating school in her play at home whereas others had a more complex relationship with school, with SW declaring a hatred toward

the school system. However, there was not an obvious correlation between enjoying school and attainment as there were varied accounts of achieving qualifications at all levels including GCSE and A-level resits. Nevertheless, each participant demonstrated aspiration and pertinacity which helped them achieve their goal.

RN: 'I spoke my local dialects, so even when I started at school the following year they had to, attach an English support assistant to support me with reading and writing. And I loved it. I loved education.'

MRH: '...I always thought, OK, I'm in top sets, I'm doing all right. And then I had an exam… and I did really, really bad in maths and I remember the teacher almost telling me … He didn't know what I was doing in that [set]....And I remember being really, really, really upset. And I think particularly because at that time, my friend… was white and she didn't do well either. But actually there was no conversation with her about how, … terrible she'd done or the fact that she was incompetent…'

SW: '...I was really proud of them [GCSE's] because I knew that actually some of my teachers…wanted me to have a bit of egg on my face because I was a bit problematic in the sense that I was always raising problems, raising issues, always challenging them on their practices...'

DH: '...I went to give it to him [the teacher] and he's like, what's this? You've used the wrong word. This is rubbish. Start again…And that knocked me so much... I've always questioned my ability to write since then. And so I've carried that with me everywhere I go… I carried that with me into secondary school. I carried that with me, I think probably into university and even post grad…'

AW: '... school was the best time of my life. I enjoyed every moment of school and it's this message that I translated to my children is, …. I didn't miss a day of school.'

SW's narrative featured a harrowing incident in which she was wrongfully arrested at school. The Headteacher facilitated the arrest and allowed the police to take her to the station without an appropriate adult to accompany her, instead he notified her mother who was at work at the time. On reflection she attributes this to an overall mistrust of authority figures including the police. The comparison with the case of Child Q cannot be overlooked in acknowledgement of the systemic oppression faced by Black children in education. The incident demonstrated that the school system was not there to protect her and has influenced her rebellion and activism for other students who are minoritised.

All of the participants held the strong belief of education being valuable; a value base that Mirza, H. S. and Reay, D. (2000) state is commonplace in UK African-Caribbean communities. They argue that Saturday supplementary schools, founded by community leaders, are a resistance strategy that disrupt structural oppression to achieve desired educational success (Mirza, H. S. and Reay, D. 2000). SW and ST both attended a Saturday supplementary school that taught them about their history and offered them Black role models like Nelson Mandela who was not present in the mainstream curriculum at the time. Both spoke positively about the impact of Saturday school.

SW: 'I used to go to a Saturday supplementary school and… it was reinforced to me…we are Black, and the education system isn't necessarily fair.'

ST: 'So I remember… learning about Marcus Garvey and, you know… Africa and everything else…

Their recollections credit this extra learning opportunity as a source of encouragement to Black children to pursue academic prowess in the face of adversity and systemic injustice, a sentiment echoed by Mirza, H. S. and Reay, D. (2000).

All of the women valued education for others and challenged the inequalities in knowledge creation. Thus, each of them have been involved in contributing to the decolonizing of the UK Higher Education curriculum through ED&I roles and research. Their actions align with the intentions of many Black women educators who seek to disrupt the impact of a Eurocentric curriculum on Black learners (Mirza, H. S. and Reay, D, 2000).

AW: 'I set up a summer school for six weeks because I really was about trying to decolonize the curriculum but involve my students.'

RN: 'It's when I'm with, it's when I'm giving back to the students that I feel, yeah, I'm in the right place at the right time.

DH: 'I was passionate about students journeys and the experiences of black students .'

MRH: '...one of my drivers is I wanted to go somewhere where actually I could be influential in changing the landscape of the students' experience, but also just so that these students could be proud of their degrees, students and things like that, so.'

Phase C: Employment in Social Work Practice

The participants' work experience and prominent roles spoke to their ability and integrity with some of the women quickly advancing into leadership roles. As a manager, SW provided education and training opportunities for her staff members; her team was predominantly Black.

AW:'…I qualified in 1990. I became a manager in 1996 working for a charity and then 1999, I went into local authority children and families…as a team manager of leaving care service. 2002/3 I became a service manager for another local authority on a locum basis, and then when for a permanent post in 2003 and got that as a service manager.'

DH: '...I think I graduated in 2005.By 2007, I was in a management position and I stayed in a management position until I got into academia.'

SW:'...I was very much aware that outside of them [support workers] getting some recognised training and qualifications, this was the cycle they were in and I really wanted…to challenge that Black people always have to be at the bottom.'

MRH: 'I was about two years qualified and I remember [managers name] saying it's time for me to apply for a manager's position and I didn't really want to.'

The women also spoke about the hostility they faced during employment which often caused them to rebel against discriminatory practices by leaving oppressive environments an option afforded by their educational achievements. ST describes the hostility that led to her leaving a permanent local authority post to become an agency social worker for a number of years.

ST: I think it was an Asian manager that I had, and I remember telling her I had a masters or she found out…and ever since that day she made my life hell…I don't think she expected a black woman to have a master's degree. She didn't say it…it was that unspoken thing.....She criticised my work. Everything was an issue where it hadn't been, you know, prior to that moment.

DH: 'I was gutted because I loved that job. I really, really loved that job. And I remember I went for a promotion in that job, and he told me, no, I'm too young. And I was like, OK'.

MRH: '...he stole my ideas, without me realising that he did so I would just have these conversations. I would introduce ideas. I'd talk about them in our management group and actually what he would do is he would go and take that information and develop it as his own idea…'

RN: '... in terms of my work, so start started off in local authority, but I saw quite quickly that there's a lot of barriers there, we're working in a constraint system.

SW: '...so, I thought, I'm not wasting my time in an organisation that I'm not going to make any difference in. So, I left there and went to work with school-aged mums…'

MRH recounted an occasion where she resisted oppression and remained in the role. She was forced to seek legal advice about her employment offer when she was the victim of a significant pay gap in a role that she and a white male were both undertaking. MRH faced the dilemma of jeopardising an employment environment that she enjoyed working in and decided against taking legal action despite having a case. Instead through discussions with her employer she advised them of her legal advice which resulted in them offering her the salary her role deserved. This was the first time in employment that MRH had considered the impact her intersecting identity had on her progression.

A critical race feminist perspective offers insight into some of the participant's experience of navigating the impact of their intertwined identity (Meshelemiah, J. C. A, 2023). The women's success challenged the perception of Black people being underachievers. Their personal achievements of overcoming racial and gender oppressive practices were accomplished as they experienced adversity and for some whilst balancing their role as mothers and caregivers which is demonstrated in their strategic career choices.

AW:"I haven't forgotten that although my qualifications say I'm middle class, that I am a working-class girl and I made it so they can make it and that's what I want to make everybody to know.'

ST: '...I always remember thinking, I can't wait to get into into a position where I can use my voice because I felt I'd been silenced for years, particularly in the early part of my social work career. I had a young family,... I was the only breadwinner. There was a lot riding on it. I needed to work. I needed to feed my kids so I couldn't afford to, you know, say what I really wanted to say. Most of the time, and that weighed heavily on me.'

MRH: '...And then I kind of got into a bit of a struggle with myself in that journey as as being the only black female who the organisation could see as being able to do with that, like, yes, I'm good at that. All right. So yes, I can see that as a strength'

DH: '…I was just like, look, I'm doing a job. I'm good at what I do. I like what I do. I'm just gonna do it. And I'm gonna have to push through these barriers, these adversities, these people's people's issues, this racism, this sexism…And it was hard work. It was just draining at times…I just don't have the energy and I'm still young. So for me, I'm like, maybe if I was older, I would be able to deal with it. But I'm still young…'

RN: '...You're a black girl. You're a Black African girl living in the UK. You're going to have to work twice as hard or 10 times as hard or however much harder. You're never going to be British.'

Phase D: Becoming an academic

By embarking on careers in academia the women have continued to resist the negative expectations of Black women. SW spoke about her journey in academia as one that was well supported as she had other Black colleagues '*pave the way*'. She has a supportive team that encouraged her to embark on her PhD and attend conferences to share her research. Other participants had received mentorship in their academic roles which they deemed to be fundamental in their ability to progress. DH and ST both spoke of an impressive trajectory in their academic career.

ST: 'I had a lovely black mentor…who mentored me for that year and literally held my hand. Because I was really naive. But that's when I started to understand about the awarding gap and the progression. At that point, I wasn't looking for any kind of promotion. I was literally just trying to understand the landscape.'

DH: '…I was able to achieve a lot in the short space of time that I was there,... I was the course director… for two academic years… I found doing research a lot easier in terms of navigating the

system than being an academic…I attended conferences. I've written papers… I've written chapters in the book, journal articles and that's all a way of getting your knowledge and yourself out there…'.

Having completed her PhD, and her wealth of theoretical knowledge and practice experience, AW found that she was fulfilling a full-time role in her part-time hours role in her willingness to support her new team. Although it seemed her contributions were welcomed by students, it earned her resentment from some colleagues. Coming from a practice background somewhat prepared AW for her demanding workload. Unfortunately, she was not prepared for the credibility to be questioned.

AW: 'I had written my first journal article, … I experienced racism that I'd never experienced before in my career where people who were subordinate to me, were questioning my knowledge on an area, and I've been in fostering adoption by then, probably 17/18 years'

This experience and others like it have motivated the women to challenge racism in HE and become activists; each approaching this in their own way.

AW: 'I have a moral duty now that my children are sorted, to help every other Black child to make it…'

SW: '...I use my lived experience and my research knowledge to really push the anti-racist, anti-oppressive practice and to highlight the two.'

DH: 'I started to struggle with the way that they were treating students, many black students because our student population at the university was 8% black students.'

RN: 'Anti racist practise. I'm talking to them about microaggressions. I'm talking to them. About what? What does oppressive practice look like?'

There was a consensus that unofficial roles are attributed to Black academics relating to equality, diversity and inclusion activities and a shared frustration that despite these activities being recognised and

supported at department level, they were not always fully appreciated in the HR processes. SW provided the example of trying to get a promotion and had followed all the advice given but despite this, she was not offered the role of Senior Lecturer. She stated that ironically, she was asked to do the Anti- Racism Training, in recognition of her unique skills and lived experience, however, there was a reluctance to recognise this as an additional attribute, amongst her previous work and lived experience. SW spoke about this causing her anguish, particularly given that she wants to grow in academic work.

Summary

The blended narratives portray Black women raised in families that value education and highlight how this foundation positioned them to navigate life and make positive contributions to society. The women's accounts demonstrate that injustices experienced in primary and secondary school can influence a child's self esteem and activate a sense of social activism which can outlook on life. The women spoke of achieving good qualifications in further education and higher education, which resulted in them securing social work positions. Their recollections chart varied experiences of how their gender and ethnicity influenced the way they were treated. Nevertheless, they were all able to build a career that led to them being academics on Social Work courses. Some of the women have found academia a challenging but rewarding sector, whilst others have felt undervalued despite their knowledge, experience. Regardless of personal experience, the women were all aware of the racial disparities that exist in academia and were involved in ED&I work which was driven by internal and external expectations.

Discussion & Findings

By successfully engaging in education and professional employment the women resisted the internal impact of racialised oppression and sought personal achievements. There was a clear sense of rebellion from the women against the structural inequalities they experienced and this developed into social activism when they embarked on their academic journey.

1) Resistance

The importance of early life appears to be fundamental in developing resistance in women. Some of the narratives portrayed a stable home environment created by immediate and extended family to provide a nurturing environment. Conversely, others depicted disruption which created a period of instability (Rollock 2019). Nevertheless our families all had a positive attitude to education resisting the negative stereotype of Black families and those values continue to be prevalent in adulthood. Belonging to families that were able to meet our physiological, safety and emotional needs provided a foundation that boosted

our self-esteem enabling us to feel confident in pursuing our aspirations in line with Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Equally important to developing resistance was the passion for learning. A passion for learning was evident through each narrative with each of us giving accounts of how obtaining an education was something we strived for which also informed our own parenting. It equally motivated us to support other students, and especially mentor those from similar ethnic origins. As Black academics we are more likely to understand the difficulties that Black students may face whilst navigating the white space of university. Our passion for learning also had a bearing on the academic career we pursued.

The resistance demonstrated challenges O'Connor (2001) the pathological approach of trying to raise the aspirations of Black students which is adopted in education, suggesting a systemic approach is required to cultivate anti-oppressive cultures in education and employment institutes.

2) Rebellion

The need to overcome injustices in education and employment forced the women to rebel. Each woman shared examples of having to overcome obstacles that threatened their educational and career success, refusing to accept oppressive treatment. Although some of those challenges were generalisable for women navigating society, their accounts captured the additional hurdle of racism.

The rebellious spirit in these women, particularly when faced with systemic oppression in education and employment, is often traced back to the values and upbringing instilled during their formative years. As described in Phase A: Family Life all experienced strong familial support and an emphasis on education. Parents played a crucial role in fostering rebellion against injustice by promoting academic success and personal growth. This strong familial foundation is reflected in the participants' recollections, where many cited their parents' encouragement and high expectations as key motivators for their educational and career success.

The rebellion they carried into their education and careers was not just about achieving personal success but also about challenging systemic racism and gender discrimination. These women turned their personal experiences of resistance into a broader fight for equitability and inclusion, echoing the same values of perseverance and resilience they learned from their families.

3) Activism

Higher education institutions fail to acknowledge that they are founded on the social construction of whiteness which is not neutral, thus, often trying to adopt colour blind operating procedures. This approach as well as the generic anti oppressive practice that conflates racism with other forms of oppression further marginalises Black women. Thus, making it difficult for discriminatory hiring and promotion practices within universities to be attributed to racism. The narratives indicated that when a Black academic had a mentor or supportive team to help them navigate the whiteness of academia they were able to progress with relative ease. In the absence of such support, the institutes tended not to embrace cultural differences or recognise Black female academics; their contributions and prior experience could be unrecognised and fail to yield opportunities for academic progress.

Bhopal & Jackson (2015) found that the efforts of BME staff often went unrecognised in universities which could be because much of their ED&I work is not recognised in their deployment and doesn't always contribute to the REF. Burke et al (2000) and Wilson & Primus (2021) refer to the common practice of expecting free labour from staff, with no recognition of efforts put in which also relates to ED&I activities. This includes experiences of being expected to undertake extra work without being financially compensated. The participant accounts spoke of the additional expectations from colleagues and Black students for the Black female academics to be unofficial mentors and in turn role models for Black students, who would often seek help from us.

8. Conclusion

The paper used a narrative methodology, producing case studies of the six Black female academics. Unsurprisingly, the topic of racism permeates this paper and is encompassed in the central themes. As explained by the tenets of whiteness theory and critical race theory this is not easily detectable due to the precision that racism is sewn into the fabric of universities. Whilst we had secure and relatively privileged upbringings, as adults recounting our stories, we recognised the insidious nature of racism in our childhoods. The narratives clearly depicted the necessity of activism, rebellion and resistance throughout our lives that has been needed in our employment with UK universities. Our parents had to deal with the legacy of colonialism, in terms of how Black people are viewed, which influenced the way the researchers were raised. Our families knew and passed on the importance of formal education. They sowed the seed in us and in turn continue this with our children, and maternally in the students that we teach.

The case studies highlighted the various strategies employed to survive the overt and subtle forms of bias, discrimination and exclusion within academia. These strategies included establishing supportive networks; offering and receiving mentorship; developing our personal resilience to achieve our goal, notwithstanding creating alternative pathways to distribute knowledge and obtain career satisfaction. The collective love of education, igniting the activism, which is demonstrated in how they decolonise the curriculum, adopting a non-Eurocentric outlook, researching in a narrative style, sharing their experiences in parable form to assist students to think about 'the self'. Additionally, we are aware of our different value bases and belief systems that empower students by challenging and questioning them to think beyond what they currently know in order to dismantle the legacy of colonialism that continues to oppress.

The researchers empathise with the plight of our students as we recall our own experiences of being held back in our progress, overworked in areas of ED&I, and mentoring and supporting Black students. Writing this paper denotes an act of resistance, as Black, female academics, by contributing to credible academic sources documenting our experiences, urging that the system changes. The case studies refute the colonial view that Black women are not intelligent and unable to be professional. Instead, UK universities and AdvanceHE need to provide senior academics with anti-racist training to prevent them being complicit with racist infrastructures in their institutions. Conner et al., (2022) note that as far back as the 1970s in the US, Black administrators and the researchers were employed to offset charges of institutional racism as institutions increased efforts to recruit more Black students. Similarly, British universities want to be representative, in terms of ethnicity, Arday (2018) and gender equality, leading to the appointment of Black academics. However, once Black female staff are appointed, their progression is restricted by the racial and gender discriminatory practices whilst being expected to contribute to unrecognised ED&I tasks. This fails to recognise their wealth of knowledge and experience.

In the context of higher educational institutions, moving beyond tokenism involves developing work environments where Black female academics are not simply employed to meet ED&I requirements but are appreciated for their expertise and contributions. This requires that black female academics have equitable opportunities for promotion, research funding, and leadership roles. It also involves challenging and dismantling systemic racism and sexism that contribute to discrimination and barriers to success. By promoting an inclusive culture, where staff can contribute and thrive; providing mentorship and support networks and implementing policies that address all forms of inequity.

In summary, the presence and contributions of black women academics go far beyond tokenism. Their unique perspectives, informed by rich cultural backgrounds and lived experiences, bring invaluable diversity to higher education. Their resilience in the face of systemic barriers exemplifies strength and

dedication to their fields. By challenging the status quo, they drive meaningful change within academia, advocating for inclusivity, social justice, and equity. Their work fosters a more inclusive environment that benefits students, faculty, and the broader academic community. Recognising their worth is essential not just for representation but for enriching academic discourse and paving the way for future generations of scholars. Through their leadership and commitment, black women academics are instrumental in reshaping the landscape of higher education. Black women academics bring more than just representation—they offer unique insights, drive positive change, and challenge systemic barriers. Recognising their contributions is crucial for fostering diversity, promoting inclusivity, and enriching academic discourse.

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