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Title: Re-centring anti-racist practice in social work education and training in England: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Data from nine focus group discussions is presented here, contained within a larger study. The focus groups involved social work students, academics, practice educators and newly qualified social workers, and explored challenges and opportunities as these emerged from the upsurge of the Black Lives Matter movement and relevant activism following the end of May 2020.

The majority of participants do not feel they have been prepared well, for anti-racist practice; more than one third of the respondents has felt discriminated against in their practice; most claimed that their placement or practice adheres to culturally sensitive practice.

This paper concludes that a sustained agenda in social work education and training is needed, which will address anti-racist practice by name, as well as promote a greater degree of self-awareness and self-understanding of professionals.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter, anti-racist practice, social work, education and training

ACCEPTED

Introduction

On 25 May 2020, whilst the global pandemic continues (until the time of writing this paper) to impact all aspects of social life (Pentaris, 2021), the world witnessed the death of George Floyd. Floyd was an African American man, who died through excessive force used by law enforcement officer Derek Chauvin, who has since been convicted of Floyd's death. The event regenerated an ongoing debate around police brutality directed at those of Afro-Caribbean descent, and sparked activism with an exclaim for change. One of the predominant movements in this activism was Black Lives Matter (BLM). BLM is a movement that has been active since 2013, but George Floyd's death incited one of its biggest global racial protests, in either a physical or digital space. The movement challenged the current structures of society and existing organisations who hold authority, as well as insisting that individuals look to themselves, to question and dismantle prevailing ideologies around race. Racial disparities in the US were also highlighted in the way police officers enforced coronavirus 'lockdown' rules and penalized those who were breaching them, with far more aggressive treatment being used against the black community.

A UK government response to some of the obvious emerging racial and health inequalities, was to commission a report on race and ethnic disparities (Race Disparity Unit, 2021). It was compiled using data collected from the Cabinet Office Race and Disparity unit with an objective to develop an understanding of why disparities exist today in the UK, and what action can be taken to eliminate these. The four key areas that were examined were education, health, employment, and crime and policing. Contrary to other research evidence (e.g., Ahmet, 2020; Tate and Page, 2018), the report argued that central systems and institutions in Britain were not racist, and the disparities existing had very little to do with racism. Contradicting abundant research claiming otherwise, the report claimed that there was a reluctance 'to acknowledge that UK is open and fair' (Race Disparity Unit, 2021, p.6) by some communities, and this openness can be evidenced by the success of some minority groups in education and employment. Notwithstanding the report's findings strong evidence and scholarship continues to argue that institutional racism is present nowadays (Tate and Page, 2018; Michael et al, 2017), and BLM is a movement that truly responds to the structural and institutional racism and inequalities that Black communities experience (Fletcher and Waraschinski, 2021).

Before exploring how BLM is a key learning tool for social work, it is important to describe the terms 'racism' and 'institutional racism' in the context of this paper. Racism refers to either discrimination or prejudice experienced by an individual or a group of people on the basis of their racial identity. Drawing on socio-political debates about race (Solomos, 1996), when looking at racism and social inequalities together, the concepts of racial inequalities emerge. Further, when exploring processes and institutions that historically and politically have been established for the benefit of White people specifically, structural racism is observed (Egede and Walker, 2020).

The history of anti-racism in the UK dates back hundreds of years, linked with slavery, colonisation and power imbalance (Williamson and Khiabany, 2010). It is only since 1965 that racism became illegal in the region, and several activist movements preceded BLM in an attempt to tackle those issues, and BLM is thus not the first movement to raise awareness in this area, yet a contemporary one which has benefited from the presence of social media that

increased its visibility (Carney, 2016). In understanding the ethos and vision that underpin anti-racist practice (Townsend and McMahon, 2021), the BLM provides a voice and insight to the needs of black communities, and recognition of the changes required to support the mission of achieving an anti-racist society (NASW, 2020). As a movement, it advocates that there is a need for all involved with tackling social injustices, like social workers, to be committed to the action required for change and to be prepared to work in coalition with external agencies to generate this change. The BLM movement proposes that key elements required for change, such as equal opportunity, housing, social background and political party voting patterns that support an anti-racist agenda cannot be overlooked by social work (Rao et al, 2021; NASW, 2020).

A concept often argued by the movement BLM is 'Defunding the police'; this is quite often misunderstood as a literal act of taking away economical funding and dismantling the law enforcement system (NASW, 2020). Yet, what the movement action proposes is the notion of the 'reimagining of the police' and its role in society. The argument is that it will be beneficial for funding to be reallocated to more appropriate organisations and professionals that support and serve the community, with a heightened sense of accountability (NASW, 2020). Social workers are at the heart of this (also see Baines, 2021), with a belief that some of the day-to-day functions of the police are better performed by social workers (NASW, 2020). There is a call to look at the current 'crisis management system'; how it is functioning and where it can be improved. The argument is that this can be achieved by the use of social work and mental health programmes, where more funding can support with preventative work in crisis management (NASW, 2020). Baines (2021), similarly, argued that where social work has unintentionally contributed to the state-imposed coercion and control of marginalised groups, it needs to rethink its position in the neoliberal context and propose new ways of autonomy and resistance.

A recent report (Pentaris et al, 2021) conducted on behalf of Social Work England, the regulatory social work body in the UK, concentrated partially on equality, diversity, and inclusion in social work education and training, and this included how prepared students and newly qualified social workers felt for anti-racist practice and what the impact BLM had on their learning. The report found that anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice was heavily incorporated into social work programmes but there was a lack of dialogue around anti-racist practice. Moreover, the findings showed that 16 % of student and 17% of graduates disagreed that they acquired knowledge about anti-racist practice from their course provider. These findings have previously been noted in social work research, which has shown that the umbrella terminology 'anti-discriminatory practice', when looking at race, dilutes the emphasis of a specific form of discrimination and its impact (Tadam et al, 2013, p.1). This finding supports the need to recentre anti-racist practice in social work education and training.

When looking at the impact of BLM as a social activist movement on social work education and training, 29.7% of the students and 37.5% newly qualified social worker agreed that social activist movements like BLM impacted their learning and practice learning (Pentaris et al, 2021). There was a positive narrative around the impact it has in creating a space for discussion around race that did not previously exist. There was also a belief that 'The movement spurred an urgent socio-political need to engage with the matter, which has been a positive outcome of

BLM' (Pentaris et al, 2021). Participants in this study felt that heightened and focused discussion around race has had a positive impact on those they work with and how they deliver services. Further, the same report argued that those who were personally impacted by BLM felt disappointed by the lack of understanding and support they experienced from their employers. This raises crucial questions around the understanding and application of anti-racist practice in education, training and practice.

That said, it is also important to recognise the developing debates about All Lives Matter which has been argued to whitewash the BLM (Bailey and Leonard, 2015). This project has not focused on this and does not report on any such data, but the contrast between the two is considered in the discussion to help emphasise the complexities of the matter and need for further research and knowledge in the area.

Considering the global events over the past year, the time is now for social work training and education to explicitly address and re-centre anti-racist practice at the forefront of its agenda, with the objective to contribute to the fight of exterminating historical and contemporary inequalities (also see Tadam, 2021; 2020). This paper reports on data from a study that explored the challenges and opportunities as they emerged from the upsurge of the BLM movement and relevant activism following the end of May 2020. It also considers the term 'Black' as one that describes individuals identifying racial as such; this may include a variety of individuals whose skin pigmentation may be darker or lighter but not identifying as White. Yet, and while this paper focuses on this part of one's identity, it recognises that any lived experience remains the product of one's intersected identities and thus homogenising knowledge otherwise would be unrepresented of the study's beneficiaries. Studies like this one help us appreciate both challenges and opportunities in the face of such intense socio-political circumstances with which social work has the responsibility to engage.

Methodology

This study is part of a larger, exploratory and cross-sectional study that examined social work education and training in England. The present, smaller study reports on the data gathered from nine focus groups comprising social work educators and academics, practice educators, social work students, and newly qualified social workers. The study used a qualitative investigational perspective (Creswell, 2007), which enabled it to explore both the findings in isolation, but also their interconnectedness. Ethical approval was provided by the University Research Ethics Committee at the (removed for peer-review purposes).

The data was collected between January and March 2021 and focus group discussions lasted between 75 and 90 minutes. Research assistants conducted the focus group discussions, which enabled the principal investigator (initials removed for peer-review purposes) and the research team (initials removed for peer-review purposes) to manage biases and maintain impartiality in the event there was conflict of interest with the participants (e.g., colleagues from other universities or in practice). The research assistants, prior to assuming this responsibility, received training from the principal investigator and the Research Office of the (removed for peer-review purposes).

The focus group discussions asked participants to discuss three distinct areas: the role of and experience with the new regulator for social work in England; COVID-19, experiences and challenges; and equality, diversity and inclusivity. The current study reports specifically on the data obtained vis-à-vis equality, diversity and inclusivity, and Black Lives Matter. In relation to this, the focus group discussions asked participants to explore in their conversations whether the programme of study they have completed, or were completing, prepared them to feel confident to practise in a way that is culturally aware and sensitive; whether they witnessed culturally sensitive practice in the field; whether they felt prepared and equipped to practise in an anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive way; whether personal characteristics, and specifically ethnicity, were factors impacting on the level and quality of support they receive in practice; and whether, and if so how, social activism and the upsurge of the Black Lives Matter movement impacted on their experiences in education, training, or practice.

All discussions were held online and via Microsoft Teams, in accordance with Government guidelines during the data collection period, in relation to COVID-19 and associated restrictions. The conversations were video and audio recorded via the Microsoft Teams feature. Participants were given the opportunity to join the focus groups on Microsoft Teams with a pseudonym and/or keep their cameras off. One participant decided not to use their camera and another was unable to do so due to technical reasons. The recordings were securely saved (password protected) in the shared drive of the (removed for peer-review purposes), complying with the Data Management regulations of the same institution, and according to GDPR regulations. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim and processed through NVivo v25 (Richards, 1999).

Method of analysis

All transcripts were uploaded onto Nvivo v25 for management and analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) was applied in this study, following the steps of the process as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Two research assistants and two members of the research team read the scripts twice, to familiarise with the data and identify initial areas of concern. This step began as soon as initial scripts were made available, using an inductive approach to qualitative data (Thomas, 2006) and following the principles of the iterative process of thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Once all scripts were read and discussed within the team, the next step involved initial coding, undertaken by two members of the team, followed by further coding and clarity among initial codes, which the whole research team undertook. Next, the final codes were clustered, and themes were generated (see Braun and Clarke, 2019, for reflexive thematic analysis). The findings were further validated for reliability purposes, using respondent validity (Bryman, 2016).

Sample

A call for participants was circulated through online professional networks of social workers, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), the Social Work England (i.e., regulator of social work in England), the Joint University Council in the UK, as well as via social media (e.g., twitter). The call reached many perspective respondents and generated significant interest. Perspective participants who were interested to take part in the study contacted one of

the research assistants to seek further information. The protocol followed at that point was that the interested participant would receive further information about the study, as well as the areas the discussions of the focus groups would cover. At this point participants were asked to consider their comfort level with having a discussion of such sensitive issues within a group. Similarly, participants were given information about the intent to diversify membership of the focus groups, to which all participants consented.

For the purposes of this stage of the study, only nine focus groups were carried out, consisting of 6-8 participants each, a maximum number of 72 participants. Both purposeful and stratified sampling (Bryman, 2016) techniques were used; the recruitment required an equal number of participants between the four categories: social work educators and academics; practice educators who are qualified social workers; social work students; and newly qualified social workers. Stratified sampling supported the intent to keep membership of the focus groups diverse by running a randomised assignment of a member of a different group each time to a given group.

Finally, the study comprised of 11 social work educators and academics; 13 practice educators who are qualified social workers; 19 social work students; 14 newly qualified social workers; a total number of 57 participants, allocated to two focus groups of each category of participants, but three of social work students. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the groups.

Table 1. Characteristics of the focus groups

Focus group	Number of participants	Gender	Ethnicity
Social work educators and academics #1	5	Female = 4 Male = 1	White = 3 Non-white = 2
Social work educators and academics #2	6	Female = 4 Male = 2	White = 3 Non-white = 3
Practice educators who are qualified social workers #1	7	Female = 5 Male = 2	White = 4 Non-white = 3
Practice educators who are qualified social workers #2	6	Female = 4 Male = 2	White = 4 Non-white = 2
Social work students #1	8	Female = 6 Male = 2	White = 5 Non-white = 3
Social work students #2	6	Female = 5 Male = 1	White = 4 Non-white = 2

Social work students #3	5	Female = 4 Male = 0 Non-conforming = 1	White = 4 Non-white = 1
Newly qualified social workers #1	7	Female = 6 Male = 1	White = 3 Non-white = 4
Newly qualified social workers #2	7	Female = 5 Male = 2	White = 5 Non-white = 2
TOTAL	57	Female = 43 Male = 13 Non-conforming = 1	White = 35 Non-white = 22

Researchers' positionality

The research team consisted of four main members (one PI and three researchers), as well as three research assistants. Of those, one identified as White British, three as White Other, and three as BAME. Three of the researchers are qualified in social work, one is involved with social work education and training but not qualified, and three have not been involved with this area of education before. Being cognizant of one's positionality in research is crucial (Bourke, 2014), and this project required all involved to recognise their limitations in order to avoid biases. The team met weekly for the course of the study, to exchange thoughts and ideas about its progress and findings, while the interpretation of the findings was an iterative and collaborative process that allowed the diverse team to balance their perspectives and help monitor subjectivities, as argued in Bryman (2016). The varied identities of the research team were instead used as a strength to try and explore understanding of the data from a critical point of view.

Findings

The data analysis resulted in three primary themes relating to equality, diversity and anti-racist practice in light of the upsurge of the BLM movement since May 2020. Those are professionals and/or students feeling unequipped for anti-racist practice; felt discrimination in own practice; and adhering to culturally-sensitive practice. Those are presented separately below.

Unequipped for anti-racist practice

At large, participants shared many views about how the upsurge of the BLM movement impacted on their practice, emphasising a renewed focus for teams and professionals on race; and, internal conflict between race rights and rights of other populations. Specifically,

participants identified that conversations about racism either emerged or increased with the murder of George Floyd.

‘I think the Black Lives Matter movement highlighted the whole issue around racism, so we [team] spent a lot of time talking about racism in social work, and I think since that point and up till now, we are having more conversations around racism than ever before’ (Practice Educator and Practitioner).

‘This event...while we were having our usual team meetings, we would now spend some time to talk about racism, too, and have the views of colleagues who are Black heard’ (Practice Educator and Practitioner).

‘I cannot remember us talking about racism in the meeting before the murder of George Floyd, to be honest. I have been there for two months and we have a team meeting every week, but we only recently started talking about this’ (Social Work Student).

Drawing on the above quotes, conversations about racism were not of particular focus prior to the public upsurge of BLM following May 2020. Additionally, such quotes show that when talking about racism, the conversation focuses on Black individuals alone, which generalises the lived experiences of those who identify as Black, creating unilateral knowledge or perception that may lead to stereotypes. Participants expressed concerns that even though the murder of George Floyd did not affect them directly, it still influenced the way others viewed them and perceived their work.

‘I obviously was not directly affected; I was indirectly affected because it kind of changed people’s perceptions of how you are, for me as a black woman, how people look at me, how I was perceived and having those ongoing conversations with my children about race and what it means to be a black child, for my son, what it means to be a black male, and similar conversations at work’ (Practice Educator and Practitioner).

‘The situation was not necessarily about me but others would talk to me differently at work’ (Newly Qualified Social Worker).

Other participants stated that the movement created a division between White and non-White colleagues in the field. Specifically, they considered that White colleagues were lacking understanding of the lived experience of Black colleagues, causing a dichotomy (‘them’ and ‘us’) and lack of support in the field.

‘Also, I guess people that are White did not get it, why I might have felt this way and other black colleagues did, and that was quite disheartening. I was not expecting people to wave a flag and say ‘black power’, but I was expecting more. I guess support around this issue’ (Newly Qualified Social Worker).

‘I do not think there was support generally. I mean, they started talking about it but non-Black people would not get it, and do not’ (Social Work Student).

Overall, participants from all stakeholder groups considered that following the tensions and increased conversations about racism after the murder of George Floyd, it was becoming clearer that teams, professionals, and organisations were and are unprepared to address these issues and promote anti-racist practice.

‘I was disappointed with everything, because my programme is not preparing me for anti-racist practice, and then my placement is not really having any views about how to address this, but we only now talk about it, and then I am seen as the ignorant because I am White’ (Social Work Student).

‘Social work education does not truly prepare students and practitioners to practice anti-racism. It is clear from these events and what you see on social media. There is certainly compassion, but that is it’ (Social Work Academic).

Nonetheless, across seven focus groups, participants discussed that their experience remains that social work education, training and practice do not fully comprehend, consider or prepare students for anti-racist practice. Participants from ethnic minority groups particularly emphasised this, while participants identifying as White often stated that they had not thought about things in the way described by their BAME counterparts.

‘I think social work practice does not touch on ethnicity and anti-racist practice. I do not think that within social work education we actually quite realise just how much a difference it all makes to practice when knowing someone’s culture and how it works; how some cultures’ family structures work; how households are ran’ (Social Work Academic).

‘I definitely see a struggle for many practitioners. In my placement, a qualified social worker asked me if as a foster carer I would consider a black girl’s hair as a (i.e., going to the salon to get her hair done), necessity. So, this is an experienced social worker (*White*), asking about something they should know after 15 years of practice and work with BAME individuals’ (Newly Qualified Social Worker).

‘A perfect example is yesterday. I have finished filing a report; the social worker (*White*) I was working with could not understand why the parent acted the way they did and why they did not disclose a certain situation. I did because I am of a Bangladeshi community; I understood the stigma around mental health; I understood the culture around mental health but they just could not get it’ (Newly Qualified Social Worker).

‘This discussion is good for me because I guess you do not think things in this way when you are on the other side (being *White*). I always thought that simply asking about one’s culture is just trying to learn so I will know next time’ (Practice Educator and Practitioner).

Felt discriminated against in their practice

Four of the focus groups highlighted that social work education and training has focused considerably on anti-discriminatory practice but is missing out the reality of professionals themselves being discriminated against in practice and by people with lived experience. Following May 2020, and the upsurge of BLM, participants felt more tension in the field and discrimination from people with lived experience.

‘The challenge here is that you are supporting service users but they can also be discriminatory, and this can really challenge you, because you learn the theories and read the books, but nothing prepares you for that’ (Newly Qualified Social Worker).

‘As a black man I see challenges, especially when service users now discriminate against me’ (Practice Educator and Practitioner).

‘George [Floyd] essentially plucked that point and that’s what I feel is one of the main challenges too. When you are going to assess a person in the community, everyone has an unconscious bias and I had someone recently who largely referred to me as “coloured”’ (Practice Educator and Practitioner).

Further, participants, and particularly social work students, said that they felt discriminated against whilst in practice or on placement by colleagues, other professionals and/or practice educators of a White background.

‘My second placement was totally different, and I was never that frustrated in my life and that was when I questioned things. My practice educator who was meant to empower me actually did not. She did the opposite of that and we were from two different cultural backgrounds; she is white and I am black. I do not think she can understand what all this meant’ (Social Work Student).

‘I believe my supervisor was not understanding and has been discriminating against me. But I do not think she is doing it personally to me. I think this was a bad experience, because she was supportive and taught me what she should teach me, but there are some aspects in terms of culture that were a miss’ (Social Work Student).

‘I come from a very educated family where women have always been taught to work. Fathers and men in families have pushed that within our women. I wear a hijab, I wear abaya, and what I found was from my managers, when we have personal communication and conversations in meetings, they say to me, “you would not know because you grew up in a family where it might have been that men controlled the family”’ (Newly Qualified Social Worker).

Adhering to culturally-sensitive practice

Despite the many statements about lack of skills and/or knowledge around anti-racist practice, as well as the experiences of having felt discriminated against in practice and in Universities, participants in the focus groups, regardless of their racial identity, also recognised ways in which social work education, training and practice does adhere to culturally-sensitive practice. This area was particularly recognised in organisations following the murder of George Floyd, which also suggests that social work is just re-awakening to the call of global phenomena.

‘I think we have had good preparation for diversity issues. We had good placements and a good theoretical background with the University, so I think that was a good combination from which I gained quite a good knowledge of awareness and diversity generally’ (Social Work Student).

‘Yes, we have received good training and feel that all this prepares you for culturally-sensitive practice. We were given training at University and then in an ASYE [Assessed and Supported Year of Employment]’ (Newly Qualified Social Worker).

‘We teach all of this and everyone that leaves the programme is fully prepared and I do not think there is a risk of discrimination in practice. It is fully sensitive in terms of culture and other identities’ (Social Work Academic).

Even though both White and non-White participants abided to the above, non-White participants also highlighted that social work programmes may have prepared them in theory but practically they found their education to be limiting or not always in line with their lived experience.

‘Our lecturers were good and always talked about these issues (*racism and anti-racist social work*) but this was all in theory; we did not always discuss practical skills around this and it may be because our lecturers do not always have the same views as I do, being Black’ (Social Work Student).

Discussion

The themes generated from this part of the study reveal a significant racial divide among students, academics and professionals, when exploring the impact of the upsurge of BLM. Specifically, participants identifying as White were more keen to state that social work is culturally-sensitive on most levels, and that the BLM movement only re-surfaced conversations that have always been there. Those identifying as non-White, however, claimed otherwise. There is a sense of expectability in this, if we pay closer attention to the division between ‘Black Lives Matter’ and ‘All Lives Matter’. Particularly in the US, those identifying as White have used largely the latter phrase (Bailey and Leonard, 2015). In a post-nihilistic analysis, Bailey and Leonard (2015) emphasise that while the BLM movement challenges the white supremacist system that often contempts Black lives, the White-led idea of ‘All Lives Matter’ is an act of legitimising that contempt and ‘whitewashing’ the BLM movement. Other studies have focused on White attitudes toward the BLM movement. Holt and Sweitzer (2020), for example, found that ethnic identity is only a strong predictor of attitudes toward BLM among African Americans. However, social dominance and perceptiveness about power and exercise of power were very strong predictors of similar attitudes among White counterparts.

When positions lean towards the nullification of what BLM represents, and the openly expressed preference of ‘All Lives Matter’, there is a high risk of both implicit racism and the exercise of colour-blindness. West et al (2021) found the prevalence of this very risk, and specifically that colour-blindness, implicit racism, as well as narrow defitional boundaries of discrimination link with White respondents and a preference to ‘All Lives Matter’ as opposed to the BLM movement.

This study reflects the divide between White and non-White participants, emphasising a structural challenge for social work. The findings also showed that those identifying as non-White experienced discrimination in practice and universities; either from colleagues or people with lived experiences, and especially since May 2020. This is not a new territory (i.e., racial divide) (Tedam, 2021; Singh and Masocha, 2019). However, this knowledge attempts to re-centre our attention on the fact that perspectiveness among social workers, social work academics, students and practice educators may differ based on race and experience, leading to a risk of generalising across the experiences of Whites and non-Whites. Critical Race Theory

(CRT) challenges this and seeks to construct a space that rejects racial hierarchy and gives focus on social justice (Abrams and Moio, 2009). Through the lens of CRT, social work can recognise racial and ethnic inequalities, understand their structure and respond to those with humility and consciousness.

The findings from the study draw upon narratives that allude to the presence of institutional racism faced by a number of non-White social workers and academics. Specific evidence of this can be perceived by social work students stating they felt discriminated by their supervisor, and discriminatory and offensive remarks being made to a newly qualified social worker about her and a family, based on her choice to adhere to a religious dress practice. In an attempt to avoid generalisations here, though, it is important to try and compare this finding with information from previous studies, such as Eliassi (2017) and Bernard (2020). Furthermore, such incidents and the fostering of a working culture that fails to recognise and eliminate such practice, pose the risk of a negative mental impact on students/practitioners. It can be inferred that for those non-White social work students/practitioners who have been exposed to such experiences, it can feel that the profession is not a safe and empowering space (Pentaris et al., 2021), in a day to day and metaphorical sense, and poses a question of and the need for further understanding what this safe space must look like for the social work profession and practitioners who already face marginalisation in society.

These examples in practice also shine light on the difficulties and additional challenges confronted by those who face insituational racism and are disempowered in their profession. The consequences and implications this has on these students/practitioners comes in many layers. Many narratives of non-white students/social workers explore the adverse affect this has on their day-to-day intervention with people with lived experience, job satisfaction, professional burnout and employment opportunities (Singh and Masocha, 2019). An indication of this can be found in the fact that senior management and leadership in the UK is 'persistently nearly always white' (Lowe, 2013, p.152). Such practices can enhance the feeling of a racial divide (Tedam, 2021). This feeling of racial divide can contribute and exacerbate a sense of exclusion to the non-white students/practitioners from social work teams, organisations, networks and for some from the profession as a whole. The lack of non-white social workers in leadership roles in the UK highlights (Ishaq and Hussain, 2022; Maylor et al, 2021) the impact of wider systemic oppression that is reflected in the social work profession. It moves away from just individuals, or insituational examples of oppression that were previously highlighted and presents the issue on more of a macro-level. Previous studies done to try and understand barriers to why non-white professionals advance in their career in social work, showed that discriminatory practice, lack of role models to and 'organisational' barriers were some of the causes (Maylor et al, 2021; Brockmann et al, 2001). However despite this being highlighted in social work research, little has been done in terms of strategy and initiatives to overcome this.

The consideration of power and its influences in relationships cannot be ignored when trying to dissect the difference of perspective and experience of white and non-white social workers. Wilson (1976, p.5), more than 40 years ago, argued: 'both power and racism have received an increasing amount of attention in the field of race relations during the past few years, although there is still some disagreement about what sorts of human experiences these concepts actually

represent'. This appears to be the case still today. The concept of racism may often be treated as a synonym for individual prejudices, and power is often confused with responsibility in employment. Yet, in order to better understand the differing perspectives and experiences of the ethnically diverse social work studentelle and workforce, we ought to explore the relationship between these concepts and how this impacts on the interactions of the aforementioned actors.

Further, this study shows that one of the biggest changes the BLM movement has incited is the increased discourse around race. Practitioners gave examples of how this was now being added to team meeting agendas, for example. Having space for dialogue is a good start to develop a safe space. Safe spaces needed to be created, with the removal of power dynamics present; the latter can be exclusive spaces for those who are impacted. Examples of this are already present in some universities, and the evidence shows they work well (Tadam et al, 2013). Yet, as previously mentioned, trying to move away from the risk of stereotyping and racial divide, means acting in a more productive and collaborative manner with everyone in the orgainsation, with the aim to build cultural understanding, anti-racist practice and help eliminate power dynamics. One way of doing this may be to have set meetings that act like these spaces for discussion; these could be quarterly or as the organinsation sees fit. This could provide the foundation for a safe space for discussion, for people to feel their voice is heard and room to ask questions to acquire further knowledge.

Lastly, examples of discrimination and oppressive systems are a contradiction to social work ethics and values, and more needs to be done in social work education and training (Tadam, 2021). The responsibility and methods which this is tackled is up to social work education providers and faciltators, but the urgency for it to be addressed is a structural one.

Limitations

There is no study without its limitations. Despite the thorough reflexive thematic analysis, we ought to recognise the limitations that focus group methods pose. Regarding this study, focus group discussions allowed for a collective and reflective exploration and diologue among participants and the facilitators. Simultaneously, though, this method limited the study from potentially more freely expressed views and experiences vis-à-vis BLM and anti-racist practice were the participants to be interviewed individually. In addition to this, it is a limitation that the ethnicity of the participants in the nine forcus groups is not revealed, but this is following suggestions from participants during the face validity processes.

Another limitation of this study is that it does not report on findings representative to the wider social work community in England, but provides an in-depth analysis of a smaller sample that is particularly representative of experiences in the Greater London Area, UK.

Lastly, greater analysis and research will be needed to explore power dynamics in practice and during transitioning to practice, were we to make better sense and complement the findings presented here as those inform the discussion.

Conclusion

This study is a small part of a larger project that sought to examine social work education and training in England with a focus on experiences with the new regulator; experiences during COVID-19; and views, perceptions and experiences related to EDI. The present study focused on the BLM movement and anti-racist social work, exploring how prepared professionals, the profession and organisations presented in the face of the upsurge of BLM and discourse, from the perspective of those involved in it. The findings reported here neither exhaust nor complete the demand for further research in the area, but add to the literature about social work and anti-racist practice. Further, this study leads to a further conclusion; the need for a plan to develop a sustained agenda in social work education and training. This agenda needs to address anti-racist practice by name, while focusing on the need for advanced training in self-awareness and self-understanding of professionals, which will benefit the need for a sense of humility in practice.

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