THE REFLECTIONS OF A BLACK WOMAN PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER

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Introduction

Practitioner–research as a method of pursuing ethnographic research is challenging and difficult. Undertaking such research within a white male dominated organisation, as a black woman marginalised by gender and racial inequality, exacerbated the research journey. During the PhD journey, I found myself re-examining the nature of my practice and reviewing my own assumptions and the implicit value-judgements that were impinging on the way in which I was conducting the research. The process of building knowledge from within and developing an understanding of working as a practitioner–researcher within the British Prison Service was shaped by a series of decisions, which included my own feelings about my employment status, the data, and all the narratives.

In this article, I explore the influence of my multiple identities – black, woman, employee, and researcher, and examine how they created anxiety which in turn initiated a series of defense mechanisms. I found that my dual role as practitioner-researcher underpinned by my gendered racialisation influenced the way I perceived myself and unconscious phantasies were evoked, which I was unable to articulate. Through poetry I could express my inner feelings unleashing a silenced voice, because poetry acted as a bridge between my inner and outer world providing a means of communicating the anxieties. The articulation of my fear and pain enabled me to reflect and explore how the unconscious influenced my own actions during the beginning of my occupational career and research journey.

As a black woman practitioner-researcher, I saw myself through the lens of white

male/female colleagues, a subordinate who did not belong in this work or academic

environment because of my gender and racial minority status. This realisation placed

pressure on me to identify myself in two social worlds. It was difficult to unify my black

identity with my gender identity within prisons and then as an academic at my university,

because only one identity at a time was recognised.

What will follow is an overview of the theories that underpin my discussions. A short

description of several key principles in poetry as a qualitative research approach will be

outlined. Two significant points in my employment and academic journey will be presented

using a poem to illustrate the tension and anxiety experienced. Although I do not discuss in

detail the racial and gender isolation that occurs in universities, I do however, discuss this

dilemma in a prison setting. Along with each poem I present a narrative reflection that

contextualises, explores, and expands the poem. The narrative reflections act as data

analysis.

Intersectionality

Race, gender, history and other socially and culturally constructed categories are

interweaving influences on the complexity of black women's experience of working in

British prisons (Thomas, 2016). Disregard of these factors reinforces black women's

invisibility and misrepresentation.

Intersectionality theory is a useful analytical framework to analyse the way in which black

women's positionality within organisations is a result of their position within multiple

categories, which in turn leads to inequality (Farmer, 2013). Intersectionality was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). She focused on workplace discrimination from within a feminist critical legal studies approach. Crenshaw argued that black women's injuries, could not be wholly addressed by the existing doctrinal structure which separated out race-based and gender-based discrimination. Stewart and McDermott (2004) applied an intersectionality approach to explain how multiple aspects of identity may mask the influence of single identity characteristics within organisations. For example, white women may encounter gender discrimination, whereas black women may experience both gender and racial discrimination. This illustrates that black women's experience is a result of the intersection of gender and race, as these different elements form and inform each other. This view is supported by Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones (2011) when they argued that 'one identity cannot be divorced from another' (pg. 31).

Double consciousness theory

Double consciousness is a term coined by William Edward Burghart Du Bois (1994) written in an African-American context. Du Bois used the term 'double consciousness' to describe an individual whose identity is divided into several facets. Dubois asserts that African-Americans are socially constructed by the dominant group (white Americans) and thus have two selves: 'black' first, and American second – two identities rather than one unified identity. According to Dubois, this double consciousness forces African-Americans to look at themselves constantly through the eyes of others.

For the purpose of this discussion, I expand Dubois' notion by relating it to black women's gendered and racialised subjectivities within prisons. I assert that black women are fully

aware of their gender and race and may/may not have encountered discrimination, but at some point, they will come to realise that their gender and race are a problem within the white male dominated organisation of prisons and universities. Like Du Bois' claim of the difficulties encountered by African-Americans because of their dual identity, this same realisation with regard to gender, race, and status within organisations, can have a profound impact on the way black women perceive and relate to the organisation and their colleagues. It can lead to feelings of not belonging, being an 'outsider within' (Lorde, 1984) or being 'othered' (Du Bois, 1994).

Poetry as qualitative research

Different ways of writing and seeing can jointly provide a more multidimensional discussion of inquiry in practitioner-researcher reflection. Many researchers consider poetry an excellent means to (re)present data, to analyse and create understanding of human experience, to capture and portray the human condition in a more easily 'consumable,' powerful, emotionally poignant, and open-ended non-linear form compared with prose research reports (Prendergast, 2009). This approach is based on the idea of striving to understand social processes in context, while exploring the meanings of social events for those who are involved in them (Esterberg, 2002). Poetry as a means of analysis is not only a different way of writing, it is a different way of presenting and viewing the world, metaphorically that is. Through poetry, ideas are represented through relatively few words (Richardson, 2003; Seurich, 1997), but nonetheless, provide a rich source of data and understanding about the inner world of the writer. This gives poets and researchers license to write about personal experience and suggests that the impulse to create poetry is the impulse toward narrative.

The use of the arts as a tool in research has been growing steadily over the last several decades, but poetry as a tool of social research is relatively new. Hirshfield (1997) refers to poetry as "the clarification and magnification of being" (p.5). Unlike other forms, poetry is data that combines a narrative or story along with various poetic devices that express the depth of human emotion. Researchers that utilise the arts challenge the notion of an objective, omniscient observer and value the richness and complexity of artistically generated data (Bradley, 2002). For example, Furman (2004b) used poems as autobiographical data to explore the phenomenon of step-fatherhood (Furman, 2003). In this sense, poems are not used as 'objective' or 'generalisable' data, but as in-depth data that can aid in the exploration of complex relationships. Researchers such as Cole & Knowles (2001) and Stein (2003) have demonstrated the value of the creative, expressive, and even performing arts in social science research as means for presenting data. And in doing so, through the use of expressive or creative arts medium, researchers have shown the richness and fullness of the phenomenon being explored (Furman et al, 2006).

Methodology

In each section one poem is presented that explores how I grappled with my multiple identities and feelings of not belonging. Along with each poem I present a narrative reflection that contextualises and explores the poems. I then present two extracts from my journal and qualitative data in the form of an interview narrative taken from one interview conducted with a black woman Prison Service manager as part of my Doctoral research. The narrative reflections simultaneously function as data and data analysis (Furman, 2007). Pseudonyms are used to maintain anonymity.

Poetry as a voice

Poetry acted as a means of communication which conveyed my anxieties and imagery to myself and others. The first poem I present was written at the beginning of my research journey, during a time when I was thinking about questions around what it meant and felt like to be a black woman working in the British Prison Service, and why it was difficult to articulate this experience with my colleagues, friends and associates.

I have entered

You violate me mentally when you tell me I am a token of the organisation. You ignore my skills and potential, because you are dazzled by my gendered racialisation.

I enter your organisation as other, because I do not resemble you. I am not male and I am not white. My skin is darker and my hair is nappy, so you view my character with disdain, suspicion and fear.

Strong black woman, that's me. I can overcome your ridicule, ignorance, and isolation. My shield protects me by transferring your fear into anger, which provides inner strength and perseverance.
My finesse and stamina have energised my surroundings.

So you cannot see the pain I feel. You cannot hear my cry because I am silenced by my guilt, that I have allowed you to enter my psyche.

First of all, the poem immediately hints at the gender and racial discrimination present in the British Prison Service, it also subtly illustrates the double discrimination black women face

because of the intersection of race and gender. This is illustrated by "I am a token of the organisation". This is important because scholars such as Davidson (1997); Yoder & Berendsen (2001), have used the concept of 'tokenism' to explain the difficulties black women face as they enter traditionally white male occupations. Examples of difficulties encountered by black women are echoed by "You ignore my skills and potential". This is an indication that the value we bring to the organisation is overshadowed by gender and racial prejudice, because racial and gender stereotypes become the lens through which individuals are viewed and treated (Godsil & Goodale, 2013).

The subsequent verse begins a stream of direct images that are used to illustrate the intensity of negative emotions and pain experienced because of gender and racial inequality. The word "other" has a double meaning. 1) To show how an individual can be mentally classified in somebody's mind as 'not one of us' and subsequently treated differently. For instance, most prison officers are white men (Thomas, 2016), therefore black women are not part of the intergroup, depicted by this quote "I am not male and I am not white." 2) To show how black women are different from the majority of staff, represented by this quote, "My skin is darker and my hair is nappy". This is an illustrative image for the reader to get a sense of what it felt like to be the only black female manager and most noticeable because of my racially visible characteristics.

The third stanza relates to the psychosocial defenses used to alleviate the anxiety produced because of my gender racialisation. Psychosocial defenses are unconscious mechanisms we use to protect ourselves from anxiety. This stanza begins with "Strong black woman, that's me". This statement highlights the mythology surrounding black women as strong. It provides a glimpse of how I had bought into the image of being strong, because 'black

woman' was synonymous with strength (Harris, 2016). This is an extra burden because black women feel they cannot succumb to pressure or display weakness or vulnerability (Beauboeuf, 2009). "I can overcome", is a quote that brings out the defiance and determination to overcome adversity, an example of a defensive stance. However, the last two lines make a recourse to the previous stanza with "Am silenced". This highlights the tension that exist within me, the simultaneous feeling of helplessness and empowerment.

The slant of the poem is quite absorbing because it gives the reader a chance to mull over my self-perception and the effect of racial and gender inequality in prisons as it mirrors racial oppression in society.

The poem also symbolises the blurring of the inner and outer worlds and acts as a means to express the fears and anxieties produced from being an outsider within (Lorde, 1984). 'Outsider within' is a term used by African-Americans to describe the unique social location 'we' as black women find ourselves in because of our gendered racialisation, which positions us between groups of unequal power (Collins, 2000). To be an outsider within means we remain on the edge of our occupation because of racism and sexism (Davidson, 1997), while our employment status locates us within the organisation as members of the employee group.

I shared this poem with my supervisors and I was surprised by their response. They were astonished by my vulnerability within the organisation and my openness to share this through my poetry, as I had never discussed my feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability before. The feelings expressed in the poem paralleled some of the participants from my Doctoral research.

I have taken two extracts from my journal, to show the similar feelings I shared with participants from my Doctoral research, of not belonging and being an outsider in the organisation.

> The year was 2001, my first day at HMP Futa Toro, a male prison in north-west England. I was dressed formally, but as I approached the staff entrance a prison officer pointed out that the entrance for domestic visitors was to the left. I smiled politely and replied 'I'm a new member of staff', the astonishment on his face was comical. I then proceeded to enter the staff entrance, gave my name, and showed my ID to the prison officer behind the glass window. I was told, 'I'll call someone from healthcare to collect you, love'. The prison officer on the gate thought I was a nurse when in fact I was a part-time teacher. Seven years later, on my first day at HMP Swahili, a male prison in south-east England, I experienced a déjà vu moment, an encounter identical to 2001. On both occasions, I felt attacked and humiliated, yet these feelings were denied, repressed and could not be explored at the time.

Even after working for the British Prison Service for almost a decade, I found that my white male colleagues held racial and gender bias views about my competence, and on many occasions never valued my opinion because of negative racial stereotypes. I was therefore forced to constantly prove my worth in meetings, as shown below.

> Is he for real? I cannot believe he was surprised that I was a Senior Manager. Why else would I be sitting in the boardroom with my peers? He never asked Tunde where he had worked before moving to HMP Swahili. But I had to literally outline my prison employment history, in front of everyone, before he would listen to my ideas. This isn't a race thing, because Tunde is black and he's a man. But because I'm a

black woman, he never saw me as analytical, academic, or intellectually equal to the others. How many times will I have to go through this?

Like many black women who join the British Prison Service, I went through a process of having to adapt to my new role within the research remit and in the workplace. This was highlighted through the interview process. I found that the interview encounter may not necessarily create distance or detachment between the interviewer and interviewee, but rather, in fact, illuminate some of the shared meaningful connections in relation to gendered racialisation, which may result in the blurring of boundaries and repertoire.

The interviewer and the interviewee

As a black woman, British Prison Service manager and PhD student, there was a sense of having to maintain my own cultural identity, taking on the identity of the prison organisation and educational institution, while striving for a sense of integration of the three identities. I recognised similar tensions in a participant in my doctoral research. Monique is a 42-year-old Catering Manager at HMP Asante, her account illustrates the initial pressure she felt when joining the British Prison Service.

so the first day when I started urm, I wasn't that, I wasn't that comfortable, I was quite apprehensive about going to work because I didn't know what to expect really, I didn't know what the people were gonna be like, I didn't know what the prisoners were gonna be like, I'd never seen inside of a prison before, so you know you walk into that kind of environment and you kind of feel a little bit like you're a sell-out, because obviously we're black and we live in this country, you don't usually see, it's not the norm to us black folk in urm, in that kind of environment, unless we're behind

the doors. So I went in the first day and urm, one of the first things I can remember was that this inmate come up to me, white inmate came up to me and said, wow one of the staff didn't expect you to walk through the doors. I said why do you say that? She went well you should have seen the look on this particular person's face when I walked in because she was obviously expecting somebody white and I was obviously black. The manager who interviewed me, had not said, what colour I was, he just said you know you gonna get a new starter and that was kind of like my first thing.

Monique's account resonated with me because her comment 'it's not the norm to us black folk in urm, in that kind of environment, unless we're behind the doors', showed she was cognisant of black people's subordinate position. Her statement echoed my own feelings and apprehensions about prisons and my research.

Monique further expressed her reservations about meeting her colleagues and prisoners for the first time. In the above account, she described the surprise of her white colleague, by saying 'She went well you should have seen the look on this particular person's face when I walked in because she was obviously expecting somebody white and I was obviously black'. This statement is unclear because she starts the sentence by relaying what the prisoner says to her, but ends by insinuating that she saw her colleague's expression. This is a clear example of the blurring of the external and internal world, a result of phantasy and feelings of vulnerability.

During the interview, I felt we were entering a racialised terrain in which we were both remembering the loneliness of being isolated from the white majority. I was internalising her negative emotions and feelings, I became quiet and just listened to her story. I withdrew, I was disavowing the realism of vulnerability as this was too painful to bear, because in accepting it in Monique's account I would have to face up to my own feelings of vulnerability.

This is the poem I wrote after interviewing Monique. It is an interpretative poem because it captures how I, the researcher, enters the research and present myself in the text. The essence of the poem illustrates the fusion that occurred during the interview as the perspective of the participant and the insights of the researcher were combined.

You are!

You're a sell-out,

You're a coconut,

You're a disgrace.

You're not one us,

You're one of them.

You're an officer,

You're a screw,

You're a warden,

You're nothing new.

You're no better than me,

because you have the keys.

You're just like me, but on their team.

You're black not proud,

You're surrounded by white.

You're not meant to be here,

wearing your black and whites.

You're black,

You're a woman.

You're supposed to be out there,

Not in here,

Unless you're wearing blue stripes like me.

This poem is written from the perspective of the black female prisoner. It conveys a tone of anger towards the 'black woman employee', bitterness towards the position of being a black female prisoner, and distain towards the black woman employee as inferior to her because of her employment status. Referring to the latter, this mindset stems from mental slavery, in which negative racial stereotypes are the epitome of blackness, i.e. black people are criminals.

The stanzas all begin with "You're" a direct, slightly mocking tone, addressed to black women employees. They are a list of insults that conjure an image of the stereotypical angry

black woman, pointing her finger, being aggressive and argumentative. But the final stanza, shows a moment of identification, or wanting to identify with the black woman employee. The tone is different here, there is an inclination of regret and sadness that there is a rift between two black women.

The first two stanzas create an emotional response, from being attacked. "You're a coconut." Being called a coconut is perceived as an insult to some black people. The insult means that a person may be black, but they think and act like a white person. This insult tends to be directed towards successful black people. It can be hurtful; the poem is hurtful. At the time of writing the poem I was feeling hurt because I know what it feels like to be judged by others, I have been called coconut and been insulted because I work for the Prison Service.

Whenever I read this poem I feel the same intensity of negative emotion I experienced at the time of writing it. I felt guilt for being one of a few black women managers, and saddened by the high proportion of incarcerated black women. Disheartened by the limitation of the system to help more prisoners to turn their lives around. And a feeling of shame for being a part of a system that is deemed to be racially oppressive to black people.

The poem also hints at the notion of double consciousness. And highlights the realisation of being different to white male/female and black male colleagues, a result of our gendered racialisation. But also, we are different to black prisoners because of our employment status within the institution, yet we share the experience of racial oppression and isolation, which is felt but cannot be expressed because of a lack of words to describe the pain.

My gendered racialisation had a significant impact on my academic and employment journey. I experienced exclusion and had to devise ways to cope with, and overcome, this reality, either by accommodating white men/women's expectations about black women—adapting my behaviours to fit in with the white world—or by deflecting doubt and discrimination. But I remained true to myself, because I accepted that I was a black woman in a senior position in a white male dominated organisation. Therefore, I could not and would not be anything more than a black woman.

Conclusion

When writing the poems, I could use metaphors, imagery and tone, to express my feelings and thoughts. This was my way of detaching myself from the negative feelings which were stirred up and producing anxiety towards my dual role of practitioner – researcher and the whole research encounter. At times, I felt overwhelmed by anxiety and found it difficult to stay in the academic style of writing when thinking about my multiple identities. As explained, I resorted to poetry to help me to think about and embrace my practitioner – researcher role and identify and address the psychic defenses which were initiated during the process of my study.

I have written many poems during my PhD journey. These two poems were chosen because they encapsulate the feeling of not belonging fully to any group. That is, we are employees, but not fully integrated into the employee group, because of our gendered racialisation. We share the effects of gender and racial discrimination with black female prisoners, but again we are not part of this group because of our employment status. These poems may apply to

black women who work in other white male dominated organisations, because they highlight the effects of white superiority and gender and racial inequality in the workplace. I am not claiming that black women are a homogenous group because their experiences are very complex and thus, the working environment may bring about positive work experience as well as encounters that are filled with painful psychosocial moments.

It was important for me to explore in more detail the internal struggle I experienced during my PhD journey. I wanted to gain an insight into the micro-politics of the relationship between the researcher and the researched, as well as increase understanding of the tension that existed because of the multiple identities of being a black woman practitioner–researcher. In writing these poems I was trying to recreate the experience itself, the feelings, and the emotions for the reader. With this in mind, I believe there was value in analysing the subjective experience of the researcher.

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Author's biography

Marcia completed her PhD at the Open University, England, as a part time research student. She plans to convert her thesis into an academic book. The thesis is entitled *Defining our experience: a psychosocial analysis of the racial, gendered and subjectivity of black women employees in the British Prison Service.* She also works full time for Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service as a Senior Manager.

Marcia is a single parent to a young black male. She enjoys reading black romantic novels and literature. She has completed three full marathons and three half marathons. She volunteers at her local church's foodbank and is a mentor to several young black girls. She also has a blog that supports black women in Higher Education.