

## **Black women in leadership: The complexity of intersectionality**

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The low numbers of black women working at senior levels in UK organisations remain distressingly low, despite the increasing efforts to develop a diverse leadership pipeline. The gender pay gap data has shown a significant increase in the number of white women in senior roles across sectors. While the ethnicity pay gap data has shown the opposite, in relation to the progress of black women in leadership roles. A simple explanation is that black women are members of two marginalised groups (black and female) and experience greater discrimination, a 'double jeopardy', compared to the discrimination faced by individuals that hold one marginalised identity (i.e. white women or black men). The complex and interconnected nature of inequalities associated to the intersection of gender and race tends to be missing from debates about women in leadership. The conceptual framework for this study incorporated intersectionality theory and organisational psychodynamic theory, to explore the experiences of 10 black women senior managers working in the Ministry of Justice. The aim of this presentation is to show how black women deployed strategies to challenge negative gender racial stereotypes; tolerate opposition in a white male patriarchal organisation, and overcome the obstacles of unconscious or implicit bias. In doing so, the discussions will create an opportunity for social change. It will raise awareness about the intersectionality of gender and race amongst leaders, which in turn, will decrease workplace discrimination, to foster a more conducive environment to promote black women into leadership roles. Including black women in leadership debates will also provide an opportunity to seek resolutions to address the underrepresentation of this group in senior positions.

### **Gender, Intersectionality, Leadership, Race, Organisations**

#### **Introduction**

The role of white women in leadership has evolved in contrast to black women (black women refers to women of African, Asian and Caribbean descent), who are underrepresented in these positions. One explanation for this, is that black women share neither race nor gender with the dominant group - white men (Drake-Clark, 2009), unlike their white female counterpart who reap the benefits from white privilege (Frankenberg, 1993; Frost, 1980) and black men who benefit from patriarchal practices. Black women encounter double discrimination – sexism and racism. The ethnicity pay gap which is defined as the difference between the average hourly pay of ethnic minorities and white British people indicates that people from ethnic minority groups tend to earn less, overall, than white people (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2017). Notwithstanding statistical data from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) Annual Workforce Monitoring Report reveals that racial disparities exist in that black people are substantially under-represented as employees in many parts of the organisation, particularly in senior levels of employment. In addition, black staff working in the MoJ are concentrated in low-grade positions. For example, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) is the largest executive department of the MoJ. In June 2017, HMPPS employed 50,238 employees; 2,961 were from BME groups, of which 1,475 were BME men and 1486 BME women. This is in stark contrast to the over-representation of black prisoners in the institution's care.

In January 2016 a review of racial bias in the Criminal Justice Service in the UK was commissioned. The Lammy Review (2017) made several recommendations, which were accepted by the MoJ. This study aims to support the MoJ's approach to increase the number of black men and women in senior roles in the organisation (MoJ, 2017), by providing a fresh impetus to create real cultural change by ensuring black women's experiences and voices are included in the debates.

The purpose of this study is to investigate and analyse the meanings black women senior managers associate to their work life experience. The study will explore what it means to be black, woman, and senior manager working in the MoJ. From an epistemological perspective the personal knowledge that individuals apply to discursive interactions will be investigated with the aim to contribute to a growing body of women leadership literature.

Placing black women at the centre of the analysis will offer a more constructive approach to understanding the ethnic gender diversity of leadership and act as a catalyst for thinking differently about different women in these roles. By focusing on the psychosocial experience of black women senior managers, the study will endeavour to explore the strategies deployed by the participants as gendered racialised subjects to fulfil their leadership roles.

Central to this article is the adoption of a structuralist feminist methodological approach, which aims to encourage a more inclusive debate, deconstruct the idea of a homogeneous leader, and contribute to leadership theories. A structuralist feminist approach challenges the concept of homogenous white women leaders. Rather, it seeks to draw attention to the shifting and complex subject positions and the plurality of subjectivities (Weedon, 1997), to bring some balance to gender leadership discussions that include the perspectives, experiences and voices of black women leaders.

The article begins with a general overview of senior leadership in the UK. The second section describes the organisation and includes staff ethnicity and gender data available at the time of writing this article. I then discuss the theoretical frameworks – intersectionality theory and organisational psychodynamics theory. The theoretical frameworks were applied to show how social influences and pressures, which could be described as gendered and racialised within the MoJ, can impact upon an individual's state of mind. The methodology and analysis approach will be outlined. The paper ends with a discussion that includes references to other studies on black women senior managers.

## **Leadership**

There remains a disparity between men and women occupying leadership positions in the UK. While there has been an increase in the number of white women in leadership roles, women in general remain a minority (Carli and Eagly, 2016; Hoyt and Murphy, 2016). Leadership literature that examines women's aspirations (Fritz & Knippenberg, 2017) and experience of leadership, tends to focus on white women's standpoint. Black women's leadership experience is generally absent from the leadership canon (Parker, 2005) because leadership in Western countries is associated to white men (Coleman, 2012; Lumby, 2007). Furthermore, their experience is generally not considered in leadership studies, theories, concepts and research in general. A fundamental reason for this is that women leaders has become synonymous to white women, as white privilege plays a significant part in leadership.

Many UK organisations are replete with studies on 'diversity', but is limited to gender, without examining the intersection of race and gender. The increase of white women leaders

has created a slanted view of the progress made in the positioning of ‘all’ women in leadership. For this reason, individuals who diverge in any way from the ideal – white men/women are perceived as ‘outsider’ when they aspire or attain leadership roles. Miller and Callender (2019) assert that the ‘salient stereotypical notion of who inhabits leadership roles has consequences’ for the outsider, in this context black women. Notwithstanding, studies have shown that a large proportion of black women aspire to be leaders, but encounter barriers and challenges during their journey, which are quite different from those experienced by white women and black men. The barriers and challenges include gender/racial stereotypes, microaggressions (Adegoke, Uviebinene, 2018), double standards, and bias (Close the Gap, 2019). Berdahl & Moore (2006) survey conducted in the US, found that black women are most likely to experience workplace harassment among all groups. They are often held to a much higher standard than their white and male peers and presumed to be less qualified despite their credentials. Close the gap (2019) reported that around half of Black Minority Ethnic (BME) women (49 per cent) felt that they had been overlooked for a development opportunity because of racism, discrimination, racial prejudice and/or bias, with this rising to 61 per cent for those working in the public sector. The high proportion of black women leaders who encounter additional barriers to career progression associated to racism in the public sector is important because this study focuses on a public-sector organisation.

## **Ministry of Justice**

The MoJ is a ministerial department of the British Government, its priorities are to reduce re-offending and protect the public, to provide access to justice, to increase confidence in the justice system, and uphold people’s civil liberties. As at March 2018, the department directly employed 71,596 staff. The MoJ’s Annual Workforce Monitoring Report for 2017/18 reported over half (53%) of staff were female and 47% were male. In addition, the proportion of females at Senior Civil Service level in the MoJ was 48%. However, the same report showed the number of BME male/female staff at Senior Civil Service level was dismally low at 7%. Highlighting the disparity in the progression and rise in the number of white women in comparison to black men/women in the MoJ. The report further highlighted that BME representation differed markedly between MoJ business groups. Just over half (52%) of staff in Office of the Public Guardian were from a BME background compared to just under a quarter (24%) in MoJ HQ, 16% in Legal Aid Agency, 18% in Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunal Service and 8% in Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service.

## **Theoretical framework**

To examine the psychosocial experience of black women leaders requires the application of research methods that delve beneath the surface (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009) to capture the emotional responses that arise from being a black woman leader in the MoJ.

Drawing on theoretical arguments from black feminist theory, such as intersectionality and organisational psychodynamics, a branch of psychoanalytic theory, both frameworks introduce and reinforce the importance of understanding the social emotional and psychological construction of identity/identities for black women leaders within the organisation.

## **Applying an intersectionality approach**

Intersectionality was first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), her work showed how gender and race are interdependent and structure one another. Therefore, a black woman is not black on the one hand and woman on the other, rather she is the combination of these at the same time, and thus she is shaped by her identity as black and woman simultaneously (Thomas, 2016). It is suggested that the intersection of race and gender influences the way black women perceive their role as leaders and their interrelationships within their organisations. It is through an intersectional approach that the experience of black women senior managers can be examined.

When the intersectionality of gender and race is placed at the centre of the discourse – in this case, the field of leadership in the MoJ – the human experience will be grounded in the realities of the lived experience of gender racialised discrimination. In addition, this approach will embrace the subjectivity of individual perspectives, while acknowledging that perceptions of truth reflect the mindset and experience of the knower (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001).

### **A psychodynamic approach**

Organisations comprise different people from different ethnic and gender groups, working in different roles, which gives rise to a set of organisational dynamics leading to different relational constellations (Thomas, 2016).

The application of psychodynamics can provide insights into the connections between the psychological mechanisms of the individual, their behavior, and their effect on workplace culture (Walsh et al, 2011). Therefore, conscious and unconscious processes play a fundamental role in organisational dynamics.

The application of organisational dynamics will illuminate some of the anxieties, which may occur when a subject – black woman leader, interacts with her white male, female and black male colleagues. This framework will examine the inner and external world of individuals, who within an organisational setting are part of the relational dynamics which are influenced by the psychic and social meanings of differences of race and gender.

### **The study**

A qualitative approach was chosen 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). This study will explore how the intersection of race and gender impact on the organisational psychodynamics when black women undertake leadership roles in the MoJ. The application of using experience as a means of knowledge production is an important mechanism to unearth and understand black women's lived experience as gendered racialised subjects (Morgan, 2017).

The research will be based on an analysis of existing literature and data gathered from audio-recorded semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews will be face-to-face or via skype. All interviews will take place between December and February 2020. The interviews will be transcribed and coded for emergent themes.

### **Discussion points**

According to Davidson and Burke (2000) research analysing black women in senior roles is lacking in the United Kingdom, as black women tend to ‘fall into the gap between race and gender’ (p.227). Drawing on data from the USA, Cain’s (2015) study found that 5.3% of executive leaders in U.S. corporations were African American woman in comparison to white women who make up 16%.

Black women generally work in predominantly white patriarchal organisations, with very distinctive cultures, traditions and practices that inadvertently perpetuates gender and racial discrimination. Ergo, it is not surprising that they are not included in literature about leadership, as they are generally invisible in text on race employment and gender employment (Davidson and Burke, 2000).

Bell and Nkomo (1992) asserts that black women live in a bicultural world (one culture black, the other white) in which they must maneuverer to succeed. The legacy of racial discrimination in the MoJ as highlighted by the Lammy Review (2017) is likely to have a significant impact on black women in leadership roles quite possibly because of their perceived cultural responsibility (Thomas, 2016) and the over-representation of black prisoners.

While white women face gender inequality and have devised ways to overcome these challenges. Racism and sexism combined remains a significant barrier for black women in the workplace (Davidson and Davidson, 1997). Studies that examine gender and race as separate entities do not show how race and gender are “simultaneous and linked” social identities (hooks 1989), that influence black women leaders’ experience and perceptions of their position in the workplace, and the way they are perceived and treated by others. Browne (2000) posits that black women are susceptible to negative gender and racial stereotype in the workplace because of the intersectionality of gender and race. Therefore, their talents are often overshadowed by negative gender racial stereotypes (Brown et al, 2010).

Despite the challenges and barriers black women in senior leadership roles face, studies have shown that they devise mechanisms to overcome the challenges associated to gender and racial discrimination (Cain, 2015; Hill, 2013; Morgan, 2018). For example, Cain’s (2015) study found that African American women in senior executive positions applied several strategies for success, such as tolerating opposition in a male-dominated work environment, and overcoming barriers such as race and gender discrimination.

By making visible the barriers black women face because of the intersection of gender and race and exploring the strategies they apply to overcome gender and racial discrimination, will create more inclusive and diverse organisations, while encouraging black women in junior positions to aspire to become leaders.

## **Biography**

Marcia is an academic author, executive coach and mentor. She uses her website: [www.black-women-amazons.com](http://www.black-women-amazons.com) to encourage and support women, specifically black women in higher education and the workplace. She is a Ministry of Justice employee and a senior lecturer at the University of East London.

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