

Reflections From Members Of A Collaborative Social Work Practitioner- Academic Research Team Investigating The Career Progression Experiences Of Black Social Workers

Mark Taylor, Akilah Moseley, Sophia Wilson, Salil Meech Mazumdar, Celestina Rowaiye,
Agnes Law

Abstract

This paper shares reflections of members of a collaborative practitioner-academic research team in social work. The team investigated the career progression experiences of black social workers working in statutory social work services in South-East London. Our intention in this paper is to share our experience of researching a subject which holds emotional and political resonance. We do so by offering individual perspectives from different team members on how their project involvement affected them both personally and professionally. We also discuss some of the general themes identified in our reflections. These include practitioners growing in research confidence, the need to create a safe emotional space for stories of researcher discomfort and uncertainty to be heard, the effects of undertaking research on professional social work identity, and curiosity about whether our research endeavours can change social work career progression policies and practices for black social work colleagues. We caution that a safe emotional container is required when researching personally and professionally sensitive subjects such as racism and discrimination in social work. We hope our paper inspires social work practitioners to become involved in research activities.

Keywords

Practitioner as Researchers; Collaborative Social Work Research; Researching Racism and Discrimination in Social Work

Introduction

Collaboration between social workers in practice and academia is increasingly seen as a preferred way to produce knowledge in social work research (Kong, Stepanova, and Thanki 2023). Practitioner involvement, for example, can lead to contextually relevant research (Goel, Hudson, and Cowie 2018) and more germane research questions (Buck et al. 2023).

Funded by the South-East London (Social Work) Teaching Partnership (SELTP), a collaborative social work practitioner and academic research team was formed to investigate the opportunities and constraints black social workers experience in terms of their career progression. The research team consisted of black social work practitioners working in different statutory roles in South London and social work academics affiliated with Goldsmiths, University of London. The team worked together for an 18-month period to coordinate the research process.

We were interested in exploring this subject as there is recent evidence that racism and discrimination are driving black social workers out of social work posts in London (South East Sector Led Improvement Programme and London Innovation and Improvement Alliance 2023). This study suggests that poor experiences and a lack of support pushed black social workers into agency work, an employment category which makes it difficult for social workers to progress in their careers. In another recent study (Gurau and Bacchoo 2022), 28% of social workers in England reported experiencing racism from colleagues or managers at

least once in the previous year. 9% said that they had experienced racism from colleagues or managers at least five times in the previous twelve months. Furthermore, 10% stated that their career progression was limited by racism. Therefore, SELTP was interested in exploring the experiences of our black social work colleagues to understand their experiences of career progression, given the wider national and local picture in London.

Several factors have been identified for collaborative social work research teams to work well together. The research process is experienced as participatory, democratic and dialogical; different personal-professional perspectives are recognised and validated; and individual and different expertise are recognised and respected (Kong, Stepanova, and Thanki 2023). Good collaboration also appreciates that knowledge production is a cooperative and circular process (Gray and Schubert 2013), which can lead practitioners to reflect on the makeup of their professional identities (Power and Dean 2023).

In this paper, our intention is not to present the project's research findings. Our goal is to share individual reflections, mainly on practitioners' experiences of the research journey, before discussing several themes emerging from these reflections. At this stage, we want to highlight the significance of the research focus on researchers' wellbeing. Individual reflections illustrate how team members were affected by respondents' accounts of discrimination and racism. Later in this paper, we discuss how we supported each other. If you are a social work practitioner, we hope that you will be inspired to become involved in a research project after reading this paper. At the same time, our experience suggests that additional emotional support might be required to research a sensitive topic.

Methods

It was important for us to remember the claim of postmodernism: the social world can be interpreted in different ways, and these interpretations do not hold that there is just one truth (Kinchin and Gravett 2022). Hence, as a research team, we embraced and tolerated different stances to avoid a predetermined, universal, singular, or dominant understanding of the working lives of black social workers in London today (Hoffman 1990). Similarly, as the individual experiences of our research journey were also different and unique, we felt that it was important to reflect individually on our research journeys for several reasons. These include aiding to the soundness of our research findings (Crotty 1998) by being transparent about our reflexivity as researchers (Etherington 2004), strengthening research team collaboration (Kong, Stepanova, and Thanki 2023), fulfilling our reflective requirements for social work registration (Social Work England 2023) and inspiring other practitioners to undertake research.

We decided to write short, separate reflective pieces, as there are several benefits to doing so. Reflective writing helps to organise and clarify one's thinking; it offers editing control over reflective content; and it captures a specific temporal position in relation to reflecting on experiences (Moon 2006). Akilah invited each group member to write approximately 300 words on their experience of being part of the research project and/or on the impact of the research journey. All contributors reviewed and signed off this article before it was presented for publication.

Findings

In this section, we present individual reflections of research team members about their experience with the project and its impact on them. Individual contributors use mildly edited

writing styles to aid readers' comprehension while maintaining the author's voice. We have also decided to use different terms to represent a particular population (e.g. black social workers, global majority social workers), as the terminology remains unsettled.

Sophia:

Being a part of a research focus group with respondents was affirming but also distressing; there was a mix of participants who were actively supported in their career progression and others who were not recognised or overlooked. Themes emerging in that space highlight the continuation of racial inequalities that persist both in society and in some social work organisations. The session reinforced my belief that support and safe spaces for global majority social workers are vital; however, I worried that these would not be made available and questioned whether this research should proceed without such guarantees.

My unfamiliarity with undertaking research made me question my ability. It is a different way of writing, thinking and seeing subject matter. What was freeing? Learning how to write as a curious observer. What was hard? Trying to separate myself from the subject matter. What stayed with me was the importance of ensuring that the impact of those experiences was not lost in translation.

Reading and reviewing the transcripts with fellow researchers was informative, safe, containing but also sobering, as we identified themes and respondent quotes. In discussions, we brought everything into light. Not easy, but we gave each other space and shared our reflections. We also laughed a lot, ate, critiqued, politely disagreed, and planned together.

We met regularly, “keeping the momentum” became a catchphrase and I always felt ready to do the work.

Throughout this process, I continually reflected on where I placed myself as a researcher, black woman and social work manager. I concluded that there was no conflict, and I needed to be both inside and outside. My experiences were validated and contributed to my desire for the actions of social work organisations to be informed by the voices of global majority social workers, including those who had not taken part in this research.

Agnes:

As an academic interested in applying psychodynamic concepts in research, I was curious about how the unconscious process was at play during the interviews. Hence, I relied on my body sensations while listening to the participants. I became sad, angry and despondent during this process. Emotional fatigue and a sense of powerlessness overcame me, as if they were my own feelings and thoughts. These somatic transferences resonated with some of the themes I picked up in the interviews. Afterwards, personal work experiences came to mind which encouraged me to seek supervision to reflect on the systemic barriers black social workers face in career progression. Collegial support from colleagues at research meetings was useful to ground myself in my role as a practitioner and researcher.

Since being involved in this research project, I am more mindful of my conversations with others in contributing to professional development in the workplace. I am affirmed through this research that having an open and ongoing dialogue with stakeholders is essential to support the advancement of black social workers in organisations.

Salil:

We came from different places with multiple commitments and availability; we came from various boroughs [local authority social work employers]. Some of us qualified, some of us managers, and some of us academics, but it did not matter in this forum. There was a real sense of something that unified us—something powerful and important—as we heard the voices of our fellow social workers.

Hearing about the ongoing issues that Black social workers experience, resonated and evoked a number of emotions in me. Be this via the process of hearing from participants directly in interviews and focus groups, from analysing transcripts to working together as a group. I felt humbled, felt the pain of colleagues, and was traumatised, challenged, moved and inspired.

The group as an entity has felt safe, democratic, supportive, open, empowering and a lot of fun - even the sessions late on a Friday afternoon when we were all delirious - I think we did our best in those moments.

I have committed to taking forward recommendations from the research via my borough's adult social care anti-racist workforce champions group, but I worry about how committed other boroughs will be. Will the voices and narratives be lost? I have heard some talk about anti-racism as business as usual, but it should not be—it should be live and at the forefront of everything we do.

For me, the experience of being part of this research group reignited the importance of activism. Hearing the voices of fellow colleagues, and indeed ourselves, continuing to experience racism in our profession - the very profession that claims to be at the forefront of being anti-racist and anti-oppressive – is simply not good enough. My involvement in the project was a stark reminder that the need for fundamental change and action starts with each and every one of us.

Mark:

I was the only white person on the team and was extremely nervous at the beginning of the project. I was not sure whether I had the “right” to be involved in the project and felt somewhat sheepish and half-apologetic about my involvement. I felt powerless, a situation which I do not generally feel. One of my colleagues challenged me to reflect on my discomfort. This was a transformative moment that led me to feel safe and accepted by other team members after expressing my uneasiness in an existential and fumbling way. Specifically, I reflected that I felt ultra-vigilant not to do things which might alienate others; for example, by saying the wrong thing. Acknowledging these fears created the freedom to engage more fully in the project, enabling me to voice my views and be challenged by other team members.

I was upset to hear stories of discrimination and racism from black social workers in the research; consequently, I will try to be more empathetic, sensitive and allied to students, service users, and colleagues. Now it is much more difficult to “other” black social workers: every personal and professional journey is unique.

This research experience reminded me of the significance of solidarity in social work. To ensure that social justice occurs in terms of career progression, there needs to be a greater focus on equality of opportunities, acknowledging that policymakers might need to identify different policy instruments and tools for social workers from different backgrounds. Life shapes us, yet we can become aware of the patterns in which we are immersed, as others can witness and interpret our lives, as long as we remain open to being self-reflexive and accept our commonalities.

Celestina:

The project was an eye-opening experience, with unexpected learning. A reminder that not everywhere is free from racism and oppression, not even within a practice that claims to be built on the opposite of that. This is a reminder that there is still work to be done.

During the analysis of the transcripts, there were recurring themes that were worrying; even more so because I realised that I had been privileged to not have had similar experiences. It was sad to see a service that I have always been proud to proclaim as ‘feeling at home’ within to make me and others feel unsafe.

As a practitioner, being part of a research team reignited my passion for research. I have been honoured to have access to people’s experiences and permission to use that as ammunition to make a change for them and for those who are yet to join the profession. Working alongside academics and practitioners, with fountains of knowledge, ideas and compassion, highlights the importance of both worlds meeting. It has also empowered me to stay on the track of building a practitioner-researcher identity for myself, a path that seems to be less followed in Social Work.

As someone who is about to start formal training in social work, a part of me is anxious that the negative experiences qualified practitioners have shared could potentially be a future experience for me. The other part of me is hopeful, as taking part in this project has also reminded me that the hunger for change is still very much present and there are peers and allies ready to join in the effort to push forward this change.

Akilah:

When the initial proposal to be a part of this research group was raised with me, I was excited to take part, but wary of my own bias towards the rhetoric I associate with research and its actual relevance to change management. As a practitioner and academic (not a term I associate myself with), passionate about practice, I also had to weigh up the benefit of the initially vague outline I was being presented with, immediately questioning and pushing the narrative into outcomes. Would this research actually assist organisational transformation and provide opportunities to black social work practitioners or grow dusty on a shelf?

I also questioned my long-standing resistance to my perspective on academia and research, as not being how I viewed my professional position and character. As an individual and professional, I have always been clear that I do not need a spotlight, title or letters after my name to validate my skills, abilities or value. As such I have consciously always positioned myself “backstage”, comfortable in putting in the work, getting things done and celebrating the success, whilst remaining anonymous. Having nothing to prove to myself or anyone else. Secure in who I am and what value I bring. But this was my choice. If, as an individual and

professional, I was thwarted of opportunities to achieve these things by the nature of my ethnicity and/or other elements of my identity, might I be so blasé?

Being involved in all aspects of the project - interviews, focus groups, transcript analysis, and formulation of key findings and recommendations - I was very aware of the impact and emotional effect of the narratives shared by not only the practitioner participants through sharing their experiences, but also by the members of the research group.

Being subtly nudged by a colleague and positioned in the role of chair [i.e., project manager and chair of collaborative research team], and taking on the responsibility of engaging, supporting, and promoting equity in our co-production among peers, I was mindful of trying to create an environment of safety, honesty and value. I tried to ensure that we valued and respected each other as individuals and each other's narratives. I was also mindful of valuing the richness of our vulnerable competence, which includes the wide range of skills, knowledge and experiences we shared. I recognised the reoccurring trauma that racism has had and how it continues to permeate each of us daily, both as recipients and allies. In acknowledging this I was able to work on modelling 'bounded empathy', as a way of providing containment of the emotional affect that has occurred as the impact of shared realities became apparent.

Discussion

The perspectives testify to a collaborative research process, experienced as participatory and democratic, with Akilah working hard to create a safe and cohesive team space and spirit, where individual expertise and every voice were recognised and heard (Kong, Stepanova, and Thanki 2023). There is a perception that social work practitioners do not engage in research

because of their lack of confidence or competence (Power and Dean 2023). However, our perspectives confirm that involvement in a research project helps practitioners develop the capability to apply research skills in several ways (Lunt and Shaw 2015).

At the same time, the impact on practitioners of researching sensitive topics such as racism and discrimination requires further exploration. Each of us joined the research process from a different professional and personal viewpoint, and each of us was affected by our research experience differently. However, practitioners becoming involved in research might want to reflect on whether additional emotional support is required because of the nature of the research focus. We were all emotionally and cognitively affected by listening to the accounts of black social work respondents as their workplace experiences were often difficult to hear, leaving us feeling angry, sad and fearful. For some team members, this activated their memories of difficult personal and workplace experiences of racism and discrimination. Therefore, we were mindful of creating a contained, reflective space (Ruch 2007) to relive, share, offload and bear witness to respondents' experiences and our own responses, without feeling an obligation to resolve our discomfort. By doing so, we were "engaging with and tolerating psychic pain as a means of transforming it into something more bearable" (Fox 2005). By exploring "our-self reflexivity" (Burnham 2005) to reflect on what was happening to us, we were then able to decide on how we wanted to go on in our work. Without creating a safe psychic container, the group was at risk of pulling apart.

The impact of becoming researchers can lead practitioners to reflect on their professional identities (Shaw 2019). Despite reservations about the sincerity of organisations to commit to

systemic change, Salil's research journey leads him to refine his focus to embrace particular elements of social work's discursive formation (Foucault 2006). Specifically, his journey reawakened the role of activism in his anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice. Positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove 1999) proposes that conversations between researchers or between them and respondents can lead to a shift in our lived story lines (Baum 2012). By embracing a more socially critical and active position, the trajectory of Salil's work story line is likely to change (Harré and Moghaddam 2015) following his research experience.

Our research took place within the context of continuing political and societal – domestic and international–racism, oppression and failure in relation to black citizens. Against this backdrop, it is necessary to question the culture of institutional racism that is highlighted in our research. After all, many hold the perspective that social workers are “agents of the state”. Because of this perception, anti-racist practice and the fight for social justice for all are even more crucial today than ever. However, we question the extent to which the project's research findings will be transformed into action, which raises the question of whether practitioners should be bothered to getting involved in research, as it might be a waste of time. This is unsurprising, as there has been little to no research on the relationship between social work practitioner research and policy change (Lightowler, Stocks-Rankin, and Wilkinson 2018). However, Sophia's and Salil's perspectives suggest that inroads can be made within individual organisations, especially if there are initiatives already in place. From this viewpoint, practitioners as researchers may have a greater capability than academics to apply research findings into practice (Pain 2011) and bring about wider cultural change within organisations (Satka, Kääriäinen, and Yliruka 2016).

Conclusion

In conclusion, as a collaborative research team, we inhabited different cultural, gender, geographical and ethnic spaces. We argue that the process of becoming critically reflexive researchers (Etherington 2004) was an important feature of our collaboration, especially as we engaged with the sensitive topics of racism and discrimination in social work. Critically reflexive researchers aim to remain open to different voices: our own, our colleagues and our interviewees. Without remaining open to other voices, how can we expect others to be touched by ours?

Funding Details

We wish to acknowledge the support of the Department for Education and the South-East London (Social Work) Teaching Partnership for funding the original study, which helped us produce this paper. Funding was made available under DfE Grant reference number: project_5480.

Conflicts of Interest Statement

None

Acknowledgements

We also want to thank other academics and practitioners who were part of the research team: Rebecca Donnellan, Sharon Jennings and Joan Fletcher.

References

- Baum, Sandra. 2012. "Positioning theory and relational risk-taking: Connections when working with adults with learning disabilities and their families." *Clinical Psychology and People with Learning Disabilities* 10 (2): 19-25.
- Buck, Gillian, Nicola Whiteside, Andrea Newman, Helen Jones, Selwyn Stanley, Julie Feather, and Wayne Millard. 2023. "Promoting Practitioner Research through a Social Work Teaching Partnership." *Practice* 35 (1): 57-73.
- Burnham, John. 2005. "Relational reflexivity: a tool for socially constructing therapeutic relationships." In *The Space Between*, edited by Carmel Flaskas, Barry Mason and Amaryll Perlesz, 1-17. London: Karnac.
- Crotty, Michael. 1998. *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Etherington, Kim. 2004. *Becoming a reflexive researcher: Using our selves in research*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Foucault, Michel. 2006. "The will to knowledge. ." In *Essential works of Michel Foucault 1954 – 1984 , Vol. II. Ethics: Subjectivity and truth*, edited by P Rabinow. New York: New Press.
- Fox, Maureen. 2005. "Who cares for the carers? Work with refugees." In *Psychoanalytic Theory for Social Work Practice: Thinking under fire*, edited by Marion Bower. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Goel, Kalpana, Cate Hudson, and Jane Cowie. 2018. "Building research capacity for social work practitioners: A regional perspective." *Social Work Education* 37 (8): 1028-1043.
- Gray, Mel, and Leanne Schubert. 2013. "Knowing what we know about knowledge in social work: The search for a comprehensive model of knowledge production." *International Journal of Social Welfare* 22 (4): 334-346.
- Gurau, Oana, and Anna Bacchoo. 2022. *Anti-Racism Report*. https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/WWCSC_SWE_PSWN_Anti-Racism_Full_Report_March2022.pdf.
- Harré, Rom, and Fathali Moghaddam. 2015. "Positioning theory and social representations." Harré, Rom, and Luk van Langenhove, eds. 1999. *Positioning theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hoffman, L. 1990. "Constructing realities: An art of lenses. ." *Family Process* 19: 1-12.
- Kinchin, Ian M, and Karen Gravett. 2022. *Dominant discourses in higher education: Critical perspectives, cartographies and practice*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Kong, Sui-Ting, Evgenia Stepanova, and Vyomesh Thanki. 2023. "Collaborative practice research in social work: piloting a model for research and professional learning during COVID-19." *European Social Work Research* 1 (1): 84-101.
- Lightowler, Claire, Catherine-Rose Stocks-Rankin, and Heather Wilkinson. 2018. "How practitioner-led research could have greater impact: the importance of considering knowledge mobilisation holistically." *Evidence and Policy* 14 (04): 641-663.
- Lunt, Neil, and Ian Shaw. 2015. "Developing good practitioner research: an agenda for research commissioners, agencies and practitioners." *China Journal of Social Work* 8 (1): 3-16.

This is draft version of a peer-reviewed journal article published in 2024 at <https://doi.org/10.1332/20498608Y2024D000000027>

- Moon, Jennifer A. 2006. *Learning journals: A handbook for reflective practice and professional development*. Routledge.
- Pain, Helen. 2011. "Practice research: What it is and its place in the social work profession." *European Journal of Social Work* 14 (4): 545-562.
- Power, Lorne, and Laurel Dean. 2023. "Expectations versus Reality: Achieving Impact from Social Work Practitioner Research in Challenging Circumstances." *The British Journal of Social Work*: bcad174.
- Ruch, Gillian. 2007. "Reflective practice in contemporary child-care social work: The role of containment." *British Journal of Social Work* 37 (4): 659-680.
- Satka, Mirja, Aino Kääriäinen, and Laura Yliruka. 2016. "Teaching social work practice research to enhance research-minded expertise." *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 36 (1): 84-101.
- Shaw, Ian. 2019. "Doing research application." In *Research and the Social Work Picture*, edited by Ian Shaw, 39-60. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Social Work England. 2023. "Reflection."
<https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/cpd/reflection/>.
- South East Sector Led Improvement Programme, and London Innovation and Improvement Alliance. 2023. *Report on The Big Listen Survey 2022-23: A Survey of Social Workers across London and the South East*
<https://www.liia.london/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/29.06.23-Big-Listen-Report.pdf>.