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Many Rivers to Cross: The Challenges and Barriers Facing Aspiring Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Leaders in the Academy

Jason Arday and Marcia Wilson

Introduction

Despite the implementation of policies aimed at dismantling the inequitable structures of race discrimination and racial inequality, there continues to remain a paucity of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) leaders within higher education (Adams 2017; Miller and Callender 2019). Several commentaries and discourses (Adserias et al. 2017; Ahmed 2012; Aguirre and Martinez 2006) continue to illuminate the structural disparities regarding the dearth of opportunity available for ethnic minority leaders to progress within the Academy. There is evidence to suggest a continuous failure of BAME academics attempting to pursue senior

J. Arday (✉)

Department of Sociology, Durham University, Durham, UK

M. Wilson

The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

leadership trajectories within the higher education sector (AdvanceHE 2018; ECU 2016). The intersection of race and leadership is further exacerbated by the structural and cultural inequalities that pervade within our universities, often at the expense of ethnic minorities who are rarely afforded continuing professional development and mentoring (Alexander and Arday 2015; Arday 2018; Miller 2016). Leadership trajectories and career progression opportunities within the current landscape of inequality continue to remain increasingly challenging and problematic for aspiring BAME leaders (Anderson 2008). Consequently, university senior leadership and governance remains the province of the White middle classes. Senior leadership positions within universities have been historically occupied by mainly White men (Arday 2018).

Within the United Kingdom (UK) in the context of higher education, much of the research proffered regarding educational leadership has been focused on gender disparity. Comparatively, there remains a dearth of research which focuses specifically on the minoritised groups and their lived experiences as leaders within the Academy (Arday and Mirza 2018; Ashe and Nazroo 2016). The province of senior leadership and governance has historically been occupied by a preponderance of White-middle men. Contrastingly, BAME staff encounter marginalisation, 'gatekeeping' and 'blocking' (Miller and Callender 2019). The monopoly of leadership in higher education raises serious concerns for equality; diversification; BAME student attainment; and BAME academic employment and progression. The often passive and superficial response to issues of race equality within the sector creates a dislocation from the discriminatory experiences of BAME academics and their daily lived realities (Singh and Kwhali 2015). The reluctance which pervades fails to acknowledge the prevalence of racial discrimination and inequality within universities masquerading behind the veneer of egalitarianism and multi-culturalism. Universities in many ways remain a site for the reproduction of racial inequality and continue to be complicit in sustaining unjust structures and cultures (Bhopal 2014; Bhopal and Jackson 2013).

The lack of diversification in senior leadership positions is also consequential for inclusive decision-making that takes into consideration varying intersections and multi-diverse university communities (Arday 2018; Bhopal and Brown 2016). It is important to acknowledge that beyond

greater ethnic representation in leadership, there is an argument to suggest that university senior leadership teams have a moral duty to create and implement race equality throughout their institutions as a necessary means of avoiding the systematic marginalisation of BAME academics and professional staff within the Academy (Miller 2016).

The under-representation of BAME senior leaders within the Academy demonstrates a generational failing of BAME academics that have not had their leadership potential supported or nurtured throughout their professional careers, thus creating a noticeable absence of BAME senior leaders (Arday 2017). Part of the narrative that pervades suggests a post-racial society, which disingenuously implies that racism no longer exists within our major institutions within society (Gillborn 2015; Gronn and Lacey 2006; Leonardo 2016). There remain significant obstacles to promotions and career advancement for aspiring BAME leaders. The manifestation of racism through 'hidden White networks' and remains an instrument for exclusion (Bush et al. 2006; Miller 2016). The challenging of these enduring structures present a challenge for disrupting and dismantling racial inequality within higher education (Law 2017; Tate and Bagguley 2017).

The historical landscape and monopoly of leadership positions within higher education and the dearth of BAME senior leaders in the sector provides a suitable point of exploration to consider the following; what are the barriers faced by BAME leaders attempting to navigate leadership trajectories within the Academy (Mirza 2017; Iverson 2008). This chapter will explore the implications for higher education institutions facilitating more diverse and equitable leadership opportunities in higher education for academics of colour wishing to pursue leadership trajectories. This treatise considers some of the barriers and challenges in relation to leadership trajectories and career progression for BAME senior leaders. The issues drawn upon identify synergies between constructions of race and leadership and the interplay between these two contexts when situated within a higher education context. Considerations illuminated throughout aim to focus on how institutions can create better leadership pathways for aspiring BAME senior leaders.

The ideas proffered throughout the chapter draw on existing literature in attempting to provide a stimulus for revealing and drawing upon

pertinent considerations for universities in advancing better mechanisms for mobilising and supporting aspiring BAME senior leaders. Recommendations proffered consider the importance and benefits for greater diversification within educational leadership spheres and the need to create pathways that are more inclusive for BAME academics who wish to pursue leadership trajectories within the Academy.

Conceptualising the Problem

The paucity of under-representation regarding BAME individuals within higher education leadership has been widely publicised recently. The ‘concrete ceiling’ has often been a term proffered to illuminate the barriers to career progression and advancement regarding BAME people within the Academy (Pilkington 2013). While commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion are enshrined throughout the sector, rarely has this endeavour been sustained or penetrable. There has been a tendency to categorise BAME leadership in higher education into two distinct areas; those primarily focused primarily on the development of BAME staff; and those more focused on dismantling systemic, cultural or organisational structures that disadvantage BAME career trajectories towards leadership (Bhopal and Brown 2016). The boarder discriminatory landscape that pervades within the sector has been the main contributing factor towards the progression of BAME staff and often situates this demographic as the most significant barrier towards attaining positions of leadership. The dominant discourse that prevails often adopts a ‘deficit’ approach which focuses on ‘fixing’ the individual as the main catalyst of problem. These enduring, entrenched structures and deficit approaches present a challenge for disrupting or dismantling racial inequality within higher education (Arday 2018). Consequently, such structures do not embrace egalitarianism or diversification as a vehicle for inclusion (Chun and Evans 2009). The Academy has historically hidden behind the veneer of multi-culturalism and postmodernism such an approach is questionable with figures illuminating that only 3% of senior leadership positions including at Professoriate level within the sector are held by Black academics (HESA 2019; Williams 2013).

The under-representation of BAME academic staff at senior leadership levels speaks to a need to interrogate existing policies, legislation and interventions which have subsequently failed to address inequality and racial disparity particularly in relation to promotion and salary deficits between White and Black members of staff (Williams 2013). The mobilisation for greater diversification within leadership positions has gathered momentum as we begin to observe a subtle resistance and disruption of the normative monopoly of leadership positions within the sector at the expense of BAME individuals. The paradox which emerges contradicts the notion of universities being a micro-cosm and reflection of society, with leadership personnel seldom reflecting ever-increasing diverse university populations (Singh and Kwhali 2015).

Policy stakeholders such as AdvanceHE have been integral in attempting to establish equality as a permanent feature throughout the sector in attempting to dismantle the institutional and structural inequalities that pervade at the expense of BAME individuals within the Academy (Walumbwa et al. 2008). The targeted focus on establishing strategic approaches towards systemic change which embrace greater diversification among the composition of senior leaders within the Academy has been a seminal factor in challenging the existing inequitable landscape. The Race Equality Charter was launched by AdvanceHE in response to the pressing need to prioritise race equality within the sector, and has become a vehicle for guiding action to improve race equality across the sector. The Charter has attempted to bring BAME leaders, academics and professional staff from the margins and periphery to the centre of university cultures, structures and practices. As a point of reference, the Charter has provided a framework for how the sector may begin to reconceptualise hegemonic and normative forms of leadership and how this marginalises BAME individuals wishing to pursue leadership trajectories.

Beyond leadership trajectories, there has been a deeply intertwined and entrenched history of inequity within the sector, primarily because this is interwoven within contexts like staffing, precarious contracts, admissions and employment (UCU 2016). The structural inequality which pervades encompasses several hallmarks of institutional racism which often encompass tools of discrimination such as unconscious and conscious biases, racial micro-aggressions and othering. Many of these

tools are used interchangeably to systemically oppress and disadvantage BAME individuals within the Academy (Arday 2018). Despite its lofty ideals, higher education presently reflects an exclusive space which marginalises ethnic minority staff while simultaneously centring Whiteness and the power and privilege that invariably accompany this (Leonardo 2016).

Understanding the Landscape: BAME Staffing in UK Higher Education

The landscape of higher education has always thrown up several contradictions, from being a hybridity of equality and egalitarianism to a reservoir for institutional racism (Law 2017). The sector has been blighted by sustained episodes of structural inequality which have undermined the lofty ideals often promoted by universities. Issues concerning accessibility of the Academy to BAME individuals have raised acute disparities with particular reference to employment, progression, workloads, pay and promotion (AdvanceHE 2018). The structural inequalities prevalent within the sector have become a familiar lived experience for many BAME academics who continue to remain on the corrosive end of inequality through various tools of discrimination. The exclusionary terrain which presides has been reflective of a space that has historically not embraced ideals associated with intersectional diversity, with academics of colour perhaps being most disadvantaged from this marginalisation. Other vehicles through which this inequality transpires has also been reflected in the canons of knowledge adopted within our curricula and the gatekeepers to knowledge which continue to globally remain inherently White (Arday et al. 2020; Smith 2012). The centralised nature of the dominant Eurocentric canon has not only omitted other indigenous global histories, it has also created a monopoly on knowledge and the types of individuals' best suited to disseminate knowledge (Arday 2019; Arday et al. 2020). The omission of other bodies of knowledge in itself is an act of symbolic violence that perpetuates two primary functions; ensuring that BAME individuals continue to remain on the periphery of

the Academy and to centralise ‘Whiteness’ as a normative orthodoxy (Leonardo 2016; Sue 2010).

Desperate Situation: Trying Progress in the Face of Racial Inequality

Desperate figures represent a lowly percentage of BAME academic staff that constitute only 13% of UK higher education workforce, with perhaps the most alarming figure indicating that out of nearly 20,000 Professors in the UK, the overwhelming majority being White, only 35 Black Female Professors reside within that figure (HESA 2019; Rollock 2016). This figure perhaps more than any other recent figures illuminating alarming racial disparities within the sector demonstrate the difficulty facing BAME individuals attempting to progress through to either Professorial or leadership pathways.

Research examining racial discourse within education has begun to interrogate the minutiae of barriers to career progression for BAME individuals and the continued discrimination and marginalisation faced within the Academy. AdvanceHE (2018) suggests that BAME individuals within higher education institutions have historically been less likely to benefit from permanent or open-ended contracts of employment and opportunities to gain employment within the sector in comparison to their White counterparts, consequently making it significantly harder to pursue leadership positions due to the lack of contract continuity and permanency. This has also been reflected in salary differentials between White and Black academics, with figures revealing that BAME academics at the UK’s top universities earn an average 26% less than White colleagues (BBC 2018). This is compounded for BAME staff, who face an ethnicity pay gap as well as a gender pay gap (BBC 2018). Despite legislation (Race Relations Act 1976; Equality Act 2010) to address racial inequality within society which often pertains to surface, non-compulsory engagement within the higher education sector evidence suggests that there is an inconsistent implementation of equality legislation throughout the higher education sector and society more generally. The

experiencing of significant disadvantage particularly in terms of entry and progression throughout the Academy for BAME leaders and academics remains problematic and an enduring symbol of the racial inequality that blights the sector (Miller 2016; Shilliam 2015). Within the Academy, matters of representation and diversification are often intertwined with race equality interventions that are not appropriately financed or resourced. Institutional commitment towards this is essential in attempting to disrupt exclusionary cultures and structures.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Strategic agency as well as policy-driven interventions are required if BAME academics are to gain access and opportunities to senior leadership hierarchies (Arday 2018). University diversity agendas and interventions must endeavour to change organisational cultures which exclude BAME academics from leadership hierarchies. Further commentaries and research regarding BAME participation in HE must focus on challenging cultures, which continue to represent poor diversification and representation (Law 2017).

Support mechanisms for BAME academics wishing to pursue leadership trajectories must be focused on developing mentoring interventions situated within formal and informal capacities at institutional and departmental levels. This type of mentoring must have targeted focus on equipping BME academics with the necessary tools to navigate senior leadership (Bhopal and Brown 2016). For better representation to be achieved, particularly at senior leadership levels, affirmative action is required which guarantees a set quota of BME applicants proceeding to shortlisting to ensure that applicants are being selected from a diverse applicant pool.

For this process to be effective, universities must ensure that BME academics are involved in selection and recruitment processes. It is essential for universities to actively disrupt cycles of unconscious bias that reinforce cloning and perpetuating unequal representation (Gronn and Lacey 2006; Rollock 2012). Targeted programmes must provide BME applicants with access to relevant training, which focuses on developing leadership capabilities, extending academic networks and engaging in

communities of practice with other BME senior leaders within the Academy and beyond. Continuing professional development (CPD) within universities must endeavour to engage all senior university leaders and academic staff in compulsory equality and diversity training, with a focus on creating greater awareness of the issues that permeate inequitable cultures (Alexander and Arday 2015; Miller 2016). Racism is unlikely to ever go away; this is due in part to its penetrative, divisive and persistence nature. However, as custodians of the Academy, the sector can do more to disrupt its dominant and insidious patterns by challenging racism and inequality where prevalent.

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