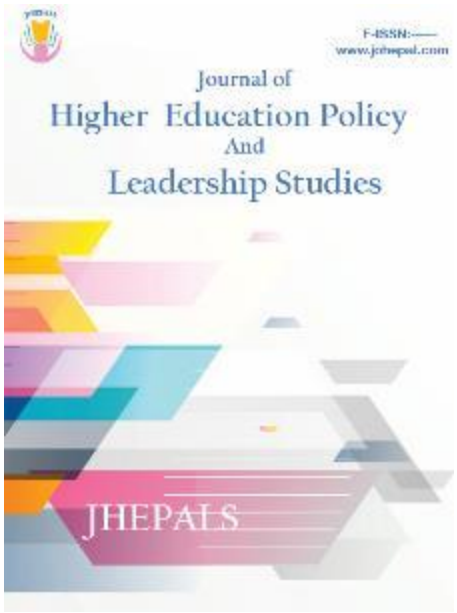
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The Importance of Intersectionality in Higher Education and Educational Leadership Research

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the literature on leadership and identity by examining how gender, race, and class may confer disadvantage or bestow privilege in accessing leadership positions while in the role of leader. The paper focuses on the methodology used to explore experiences of Black Minority and Ethnic (BME) and White women leaders understanding of these experiences in public and private sector organisations in England. The research offers the use of the author's autobiographical account as a starting point to develop an intersectional approach to leadership methodology. In addition, it draws on feminist, intersectional and critical auto-biographical theory to analyse the findings. The paper will begin with an introduction to the literature, moving onto the research design and then discussion on the initial findings, highlighting the core themes emerging from the data. Findings showed that the BME women experienced notably more challenges and difficulties in their role as leaders, and that they saw their ethnicity as having a clear bearing on their identities, their perception of leadership, and their experience as leaders.

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Keywords: Intersectionality; Educational leadership; Higher education; Gender

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Introduction

> *In the broadest sense of the word, a "leader" is someone who brings people together and guides them toward a common goal. Anyone can tell others what to do, but effective leadership requires much more than the ability to assign tasks to a group. (Harvard Review 2010)*

In workplaces around the world, organizations are characterised by 'inequality regimes' (Acker, 2006), with "… loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and racial inequalities within particular organisations" (Acker 2006 ibid, p. 443). Psychology's responsibility for responding to demographic changes locally (and globally) has been pointed out in the past (Sue et al, 1999) and more recently (Plaut et al, 2011, Jacobson, Johnson & Campbell-Stephens, 2013). A 'diversity science' (Plaut et al, 2011) would recognise that individual attitudes and behaviours surrounding difference occur in the context of historically, culturally and socially embedded realities/beliefs/frameworks.

For tackling these inequalities, scholars worldwide are likely to start with the North American literature, the primary source of organisational research on ethnicity and diversity (Jonsen, Maznevski & Schneider, 2011). In the US, there are differential social and economic experiences between Hispanic, African-American and Asian. Typically, African Americans gain less access into employment, health, housing and education (Plaut et al, 2011).However, the ethnic group distribution differs between USA and the UK. In the USA, the largest racial minority group is Black or African American (12.6%). In contrast, the largest minority ethnic group in the UK is the Asian population (5.9%). Context-sensitivity is necessary for all locations in which diversity management and research is conducted (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2008; Özbilgin, 2009; Jonsen, Maznevski & Schneider, 2011).

This paper makes a contribution to research methods for educational leadership through its focus on intersectionality and leadership in the UK. At leadership level, differential outcomes between groups occur in a range of sectors in the UK workplace. For example, in higher education (Breakwell & Tytherleigh, 2008) between 1997 and 2006, almost all Vice-Chancellors (VCs) appointed were white, 23% had studied at Oxford or Cambridge universities, and 85% were male. Until 2011 there had only ever been one VC from a black and minority ethnic background – a male, non-UK national (Bahra, 2011; Burkinshaw, 2015) however during the last 24 months, there have been three new BME VC appointments two female and one male made in England.

The pattern of hierarchical segregation across gender and racial/ethnic lines encountered in higher education careers is repeated in the UK political sphere. Here, Black Minority Ethnic (BME) members of parliament currently number only 27 out of 649 (4.2%). Of these, only eight are BME women – under a third of all BME Members of Parliament (MP's). In contrast to education and politics, there is cause for guarded optimism in the business sector as regards women in the most senior positions in the largest companies. In 2012, 15% of directorships of FTSE* 100 companies are held by women (Sealy et al, 2012; Atewologun & Sealy 2011, Atewologun, Sealy, & Vinnicombel, 2016), representing a 2.5% increase from a three-year plateau. However, when taking into account gender, nationality and ethnicity of FTSE 100 company directors, only 9.9% of female directors are from minority ethnic groups, and only one of these is a UK national. The pattern evident in business

* Definition of FTSE 100. The Financial Times Stock Exchange 100 share index; an average of share prices in the 100 largest, most actively traded companies on the London Stock Exchange.

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thus replicates the gender and ethnic profiles of leadership in higher education and politics, whereby career progression reflects ethnic and gender penalties.

Organisations are microcosms of societies within which they are embedded, and "work cannot be understood outside the context of the socio-cultural arena in which it is enacted" (Dombeck, Markakis, Brachman, Dalai & Olsan, 2003, p. 352). Organisational dynamics often mirror societies' structures, beliefs and tensions, including less favourable outcomes for minority ethnic individuals and women in many Western societies. As such, ethnicity scholars are continuously urged to acknowledge the socially-constructed and contextual nature of ethnicity in organisations (e.g. Roberson & Block, 2001). Acker (2006) and Atewologun & Sealy (2016) has noted that hierarchies are gendered, racialised and classed, especially when it comes to leadership in Europe and the US.

Scanlan & Theoharis (2016) points out that schools in the United States have historically responded to dimensions of diversity by privileging some and marginalizing others. Dimensions of diversity that have enjoyed privilege include being White, of European heritage, of moderate to high socioeconomic status, Christian, heterosexual, native English speaking, and without disability. By contrast, dimensions of diversity that have been marginalized include being of color, of non-European heritage, of low socioeconomic status, non-Christian, lesbian / gay / bisexual / transgender (LGBT), of limited proficiency in English, or with a special need or disability. If schools and school leaders are truly going to embrace social justice change has to take place to ensure that all children are able to experience and have access to world class education that will equip them with the skills necessary for the 21st Centerury.

Leadership theory, however, has traditionally suppressed and neutralised 'difference', including gender and race/ethnic dimensions (Parker, 2005). Much of the data collected or early leadership research was gathered in business, military and government settings, from white, Anglo-Saxon men in leadership positions (Shakeshaft, 1989; Middlehurst, 2008). Leadership publications have reflected this bias. Osler (2006) points out that textbooks aimed at aspiring school leaders published in the 1980s and 1990s in Britain rarely referred to equity, even though by then minority ethnic communities were well-established in this country. This was mirrored in academic journals and educational management courses where race equality was rarely a topic of interest even though ethnicity was known to be a factor in student attainment.

More recently, research suggests that the social identity group to which a leader belongs is considered a significant factor in leader effectiveness and the extent to which a leader may feel able to enact that identity (van Knippenberg, 2011; Showunmi, 2016). From a sociological perspective, this is explained by the extent to which the leader and the group see themselves as part of a collective, or share the same social identity.

While women academics have written extensively on women's position in the labour market, this has primarily examined disadvantage in relation to patriarchal power, and race has rarely been taken into account (Shakeshaft, 1989; Rees, 1992; Walby, 1990; Cockburn, 1991; Coleman, 2003). Ethnic minority women are rarely included within these analyses (Davidson, 1997; Johnson, 2019). White women (researchers or organisational leaders) have seldom reflected on their own ethnic privilege, including how this has impacted on their work (McIntosh 1990 being a notable exception). To date, there is very little evidence which advances our understanding in the way Black women leaders are perceived by white women leaders who hold privileged positions in organisations. Reviews at the intersection of leadership and diversity, such as Due Billing and Alvesson (2000) and Powell (2012), do not directly challenge assumptions of ethno-racial homogeneity in women, and the implications for leadership. Devine (1989) suggests that many of the common stereotypes of

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Black people are transferred into leadership perceptions held of this group. There remains much work to be done to achieve true gender equality at the very top of organisations (Sealy & Vinnicombe, 2013). For instance, whereas White leaders would be described as "working well under pressure" (Rudman & Glick, 2001, p. 751), "Black leaders are perceived as more incompetent than white leaders". Miles' (2013) recent study supports the claim that Back women find it hard to be taken serious in leadership roles. The study confirms that Black women reported feeling different and unappreciated. They were tired of defending themselves against being labeled angry, loud, aggressive, rude and obnoxious. More recent studies (Showunmi, 2016; Curtis, 2017) reveal similar findings and suggest that more research needs to be done. Both women and men benefit from greater leadership diversity and the healthy diversity of senior teams strengthens the effectiveness of organisations overall. Arguably, creating a culture that is more equitable for women will result in a culture that is fairer for all (Desvaux, & Devillard-Hoellinger, 2008).

Theoretical frameworks used to analyse experiences

In trying to account for the BME women leaders experiences, I utilise perspectives from feminist, critical auto/biography and intersectionality theory. In providing an overview of each perspective separately I recognise, however, that aspects of each overlap and relate in part, and in some ways are informed by each other.

Positionality and feminist thinking

Before going on to discuss the research approach and describe the methodology, it is necessary to state the overall theoretical viewpoint from which the research was conducted. I could not carry out the study without first acknowledging my own theoretical perspective:

> *A feminist approach to research seeks to base one's own research on a non-hierarchical, non-exploitative, reciprocal and shared-sex basis, with the potential to lead to friendship* (Showunmi, 2012, p. 43)

Utilizing a feminist model, the research has taken a people-centered approach, thus allowing the participants, in this case the women leaders, to take an active role in the research. During the field work it became apparent that some of the BME women leaders were initially suspicious of someone asking questions regarding their identity. With this in mind, my intention was to develop the role of the 'friendly listener' whilst carrying out the research. Being the 'friendly listener' in this context meant providing a setting that enabled the BME women leaders to feel at ease whilst they discussed issues which were raised within the research process. My role was to listen, and ensure that the voices were gently encouraged towards the semi-structured framework of questions that needed to be covered.

However, many of the participants clearly wanted more from the role than I was able to offer; for example, they needed an ear to listen to their direct experiences of racism. Some of the stories shared were indeed harrowing and placed me in a position of apparent powerlessness, as all I could do was listen. I was facing a conflict between being an impartial researcher and a Black feminist wanting to make a difference in the lives of these BME women leaders through my research – as well as recognizing that the problems they experience reflected larger socio-economic issues. It was not unusual for the women to view me as a 'sister' or 'friend', as I was, on the face of it, similar to them.

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Intersectionality and Educational Leadership

Being a Black feminist was indeed an advantage, as it enabled me to place the research in a context that understood what the women were experiencing in their daily lives. I was, however, conscious that many of the women did not relate to the term 'feminism' and were uncertain how a Black feminist would bear any resemblance to their own individual selves. The BME women leaders were aware of racism, but many were yet to make the connection between racism and sexism.

In comparison, as an academic in HE I have often asked myself the questions, "Who am I"? and 'do I belong in the academy?' There is a significant gap in the literature in exploring individuals such as myself who address notions of Whiteness through the lens of a 'Black' person socialised in a White world due to adoption to German Jewish upper middle class parents. The complexity is that as a Black person I am perceived (by some White and some Black people in the UK) as having the same shared experiences as all other Black people.

The research was essentially political, concerned not only with leadership but with the fundamental issues that lie within the female BME leaders with regards to their experiences in leading. There is an on-going debate on gender and race which attempts to push women of colour to make a choice to be part of the feminist movement or the anti-racist moment, but not both. With the participants in this study being both women and Black, this makes it difficult to move the agenda forward as these two aspects are tightly interwoven for them. It is for this reason that I chose to include intersectionality as a further lens to explore the data.

Intersectionality

The term 'intersectionality' is mostly identified with CRT scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) who, along with other scholars, contributed to and advocated thinking critically about the multidimensional aspect of women's oppression along race, class and gender lines. According to Delgado Bernal (2002, p. 116), focusing on the intersection of oppression is vital because 'one's identity is not based on the social construction of race but rather is multidimensional and intersects with various experiences'. Many argue that scholars using the 'intersectional approach' will socially locate individuals in the context of their 'real lives' (Weber & Fore, 2007, p. 123). Intersectional discussions examine how both the formal and informal systems of power are deployed, maintained and reinforced in social structures, policies and practices through notions of race, class and gender (Collins, 1998; Weber & Fore, 2007; Atewologun & Sealy, 2014; Showunmi et al, 2016, Moorosi et al, 2018) and sexuality (Bush, 2010; Strayhorn, 2013).

Critical autobiography

Autobiographical research uses various empirical sources (life narratives, oral stories, documents – both official and personal –, diaries, memorials, videos, photographs) and techniques (triangulation of information and in-depth analysis of the sources) (Abrahão, 2008). This understanding can also be found in Pineau (2012) Life history is a (re) construction made by the researcher, through the research as he or she analyses empirical sources (above mentioned), in a critical dialogue with research findings from elsewhere, and with a global view of a social, economic and cultural environment where the studied lives take place (Abrahao,)

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The research context

The presented research has been developed within the context of University College London Institute of Education, and was commissioned by the campaign 'Race for Opportunity' (RfO) to carry out research into BME Women. The study builds on the results from the research 'Race to Progress: Breaking down Barriers' (2011) published by Race for Opportunity which is the race equality campaign at Business in the Community (BITC, 2010), the Prince's Responsible Business Network.[*] 'Race for Opportunity' stands for diverse leadership on boards and at senior level, diverse representation and progression in the workplace, and the reduction of ethnic minority youth unemployment.

This research study focused on leadership and identity among BME women with a particular emphasis on Bangladeshi and Pakistani women living and working in the UK. Data collected by RfO (2011) on Bangladeshi and Pakistanis women leaders indicated that these women were experiencing the worse cases of discrimination in the workplace. Many of these women who were in leadership positions found themselves dealing with the double burden of "physically morally and spiritually stigmatized by dominant culture determined and preserved for white men and women most that is great value: the affluent life, the highest morals, the beautiful people and the power of privilege" (Batur-Vanderlippe & Feagin, 1999, p. 11).

Using the voices of the BME women alongside existing research (Essed, 1991) exposes the way that the white washed society in which we operate labels Black women as deviants and misfits. The more I was drawn into the methods and initial findings of the research, the clearer it was that there was a missing link. I wanted to hear from white women leaders – I knew it would add another layer of complexity, yet it was vital to include another dimension to the study. Including a group of white women leaders was not as a comparison model but instead it was to firstly seek their perception of BME women leaders and secondly on the experiences and challenges BME women leaders face in the work place.

The White women leaders were interviewed to include their views so as to ascertain and better understand whether the construction of race has an impact on one's individual leadership style. If we are to make some sense of the notion and concept of race, perhaps we should make use of Omi and Winant's (1994) definition of "race as a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (p. 198). Exploring race in the context of this study could suggest race is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, and/or an explanation of racial dynamics, which adds to the challenge in the reorganizing of one's thinking along particular racial lines. This study presents 'race' as a particular discursive practice, in a way in which social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based on their meaning.

The research was not a comparative study; the focus was on BME women and an invited number of white women as part of the discussion which assisted with the research design. BME women are seen as an 'invisible' group within organisations, often not represented in any significant way on employer management programmes or bespoke development and leadership initiatives. The research is not the first to explore BME women's experiences of leadership; however, it is distinctive in that it seeks to provide insights into leadership and the way in which cultural identity influences perceptions and experiences within the UK context. The women participating in the study were

[*] The purpose of BiC is to encourage the members to work together to tackle a wide range of issues that are essential to creating a fairer society and a more sustainable future.

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asked a range of questions which included ones that explored the notion of leadership, how they define themselves as leaders, and what their experiences as a leader, coming from a BME background.

Using Black feminism, and intersectionality through an autobiographical lens centralizes gender and race, opening up wider debates on the intersections which affect black women's lives and setting a context in which history informs our present-day understanding of being racialized and gendered (King, 1988; Crenshaw, 1989; Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Methodology

The research design applied Grounded Theory to develop the methodological and conceptual framework for the study. The research design emerged through a series of conversations, discussions and ideas which took place with a range of different people and organizations. The author's autobiographical account of her leadership experiences became the basis and rationale for the research. The research materialized through the lens of the author who had critically reflect on her a recent leadership experience.

The research design interconnects with the blurring of a definition for autobiography and auto-ethnography. Ellis and Bochner (2000) define auto-ethnography as "autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation" (p. 742). Similar to ethnography, auto-ethnography pursues the ultimate goal of cultural understanding underlying autobiographical experiences. The following steps were taken in designing the methodology for the research.

Step one –The autobiographical account

The use of the author's autobiographical account which explored and examined a critical incident as a newly appointed leader in a higher education establishment. The account probes into the various challenges faced in a predominantly white institution. It reveals instances of invisibility being underpinned by low expectations, presumptions of not being academically able, and (white) surprise at a Black academic applying academic rigor in all aspects of their work. It further sheds light on the reasons for valuing the diverse theoretical frameworks of intersectionality, feminism as a way to open up opportunities for further debate and wider contributions to knowledge. Using the self as the starting point in the research was fundamental as the idea started with the lived experience of the researcher. Being able to critically engage with the lived experience of the research and then the participants provided an emerging hypothesis which was used as the next step in the research design process.

Step two – Discussion on lived leadership experience with other BME leaders

A shorten version from the autobiographical account given by the author was used as a discussion point during the focus groups. Sharing the experiences of the focus group my facilitation of the focus groups allowed the BME women leaders to view the focus group as a 'safe' place to open up and share their own individual experiences. Conversations were initiated with other BME leaders to understand whether their individual lived experiences could add to the critical narrative that was emerging. The conversations developed into stories which quickly snowballed, gathering interest

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from women leaders working in different sectors who were located in England. As the stories emerged they were used as a methodological tool and as leverage to reach other BME women leaders who are interested in the research and would like to share their experiences of leadership.

Step three –
Recognition that the real lived experience connects with both the personal and the professional and the implications this may have with others' perception about what leadership is and who a leader is perceived to be.

Step four – Reflect on own autobiographical account
The author's critical incident is based on their autobiographical account which was selected and used as a basis to analyze the data so as to understand whether the experience was exclusive to the author's experiences or shared with other women leaders from a similar background. The importance of this step was to confirm my own philosophical stance and know how this would affect the methodology. The critical incident was written up as a vignette and used as a context for further research.

Step five –
Review literature on identity and leadership and develop the key question: Does one's identity have an impact on one's leadership style? A systematic search on leadership and identity literature was undertaken which identified a significant gap in the literature.

Step six – Present initial idea to an organization that develops leadership in Higher Education.
This was an innovative concept it was important to secure funding. Exploring funding outside of the normal dimensions of higher education funding required courage and a set of entrepreneurial skills and the confidence to believe in the significance of the hypothesis which intended to explore gender and leadership. Continually working on the initial proposal did not in the first instance lead to any funding; however, being able to present the emerging thinking on the topic pointed the researcher to other networks which expressed interest in the project.

Step seven – initiate further and deepening research.
The semi-structured interview guide comprised a set of 12 open questions which examined constructions of leadership, barriers to leadership, exploration of personal identity, perceived impact of identity on leadership style, and perceived differences between minority and majority ethnic women as leaders.

Semi-structured focus group interview guides were used to examine notions of identity and leadership. The guides comprised a set of open questions based on the areas of theoretical interest. Specifically, participants were asked questions around three key areas: (1) their personal definitions of leadership, (2) the relationship between their social (i.e. gender/ethnic) and leader identities, and (3) their career journey to leadership, including when they first saw themselves as leaders, and factors that may have hindered this journey.

The prevailing aim of this type of study is to provide rich contextualised knowledge of the sample (Maracek, 2003). In keeping with the study's exploratory nature and its constructivist-

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interpretivist approach, questions were used to initiate discussions and followed up with extensive probing. This elicited diverse responses rather than a systematic, reproducible list.

Ethical considerations

Ethics were considered by adhering to the British Educational Research Association guidance (BERA, 2011). Pseudonyms were employed as a means to provide anonymity to the participants. All participants were given the option of opting out of the study during and after their interview.

The women were approached through the (RfO) Champion Network, which funded the research. The RfO campaign is led by 'Business in the Community' (BITC), a UK corporate-led charity focusing on responsible business. Invitations for participants in a study on 'Identity and Leadership' were distributed via email to network members. Women who indicated interest were informed about voluntary participation and assured about response anonymity. Additionally, 30 participants were recruited through snowball sampling, having heard about the study through friends or colleagues.

An RfO administrator allocated respondents to focus group sessions across the country. Three sessions were conducted in London and six sessions across North and Central England in Nottingham, Birmingham, Manchester, Bradford and Sheffield. Only minority ethnic women participated in focus group sessions. There were 28 women in the three London groups (4, 14 and 10 respectively); and 100 women in the North and Central England groups (8, 14, 18, 18, 16 and 26 respectively).

There were some differences in demographic composition across the regions. In London, most participants (80%) were in senior management roles in public and private sector employment, comprising Asian and Black women between 28 and 60 years old. Outside London, leadership experiences were gleaned from wider contexts including the local community and independent businesses. Additionally, participants were mostly between 30 and 40 years old, of whom 80% were Asian women. These demographics reflect the ethnic distribution in the UK, with larger populations of Asians living outside London, compared to other ethnicities. For the purposes of this paper, no further comparative analysis across regions was conducted.

Data collection

Each focus group session lasted one and a half to two hours, during which refreshments were served. Considering the limited time and the size of some of the sessions, the author was sensitive to the risk of group dynamics restricting some participants' contributions. In the focus group discussions when you realise that some people are quiet or and dominated by outspoken participants in the group, time and opportunity should be given to the quieter members of the group so that they are able to contribute to the discussion. It is only when this happens that you realise that these participants bring the discussion to another level. Another important element of the focus group dynamics is the ability for participants to challenge and corroborate and validate the contribution of others. This enriches the process of co-creation of knowledge.

To mitigate against this, responses were collected on 'sticky notes' and incorporated into the data analysis, in addition to oral data. Additionally, the author employed group facilitation skills and open, probing questionings to ensure all participants were engaged and fully participated in the discussion. Finally, all respondents were encouraged to contact the first author if they felt they had more to share after the session. Sixty follow-on interviews were conducted with minority ethnic female focus group participants for additional in-depth exploration and validation of initial findings.

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Interviews were also conducted with twenty White women. These women were approached via the BITC Women's Network. It was explained to them that a research study was being conducted on identity and leadership. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in private offices or via telephone. These interviews lasted about 30 minutes.

Data analysis

Focus group and individual interview responses were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Data were then analysed thematically, as the researchers sought to make explicit the structures and meanings the participants embodied in their responses (Gavin, 2008). Although it might be expected that minority ethnic women would report particular challenges in enacting leadership behaviours, in accordance with the constructivist and exploratory approach, no hypotheses were proposed. Rather, the aim was to ground findings in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The question guiding the enquiry was 'How do ethnicity, gender (and other identities) influence majority and minority ethnic women's leadership?'.

Coding and analysis were conducted in an iterative, constant comparative process between focus group and interview responses. The first author began with open coding (breaking down and categorising). Here, salient and meaningful descriptions regarding the intersection of leadership and other social identities were coded directly from the data. This was followed by the author engaging in axial and selective coding for the purpose of this paper. Here, relationships between codes were considered and categorised into higher order themes. During analysis, both authors adopted 'intersectional sensibilities' (Crenshaw, 1991; Bowleg, 2008). This meant paying attention to when and how gender, ethnic and any other identities became salient in respondents' experiences of leadership.

Black Minority Ethnic Women in Leadership Positions: First Findings

We believed that in order to delve into both sets of the women's definitions that underpinned each of their individual styles. The question that revealed some interesting thoughts that could be considered to be located with 'white privilege'. Even though the women were not asked directly about the notion of 'white privilege', further analysis implied that their lack of awareness alluded to that of 'white privilege'. The following accounts provide an insight into both the BME and White women's definitions on leadership:

> I define leadership as giving yourself to others, using it as an opportunity to serve, using your gifts and talents for others … I see leadership as giving back and serving people through those various given talents or your area of expertise. (BME woman Leader)

> Somebody who is able to meet fundamental human needs so that the team, individual or organisation are able to achieve work goals and maximise on effectiveness and productivity. Being able to harness people's individual abilities, energies, harness it and channel it into something creative. (Middle Asian woman leader)

The interesting points coming from both of these quotes is the way in which both of the BME leaders position leadership as a humanitarian responsibility towards the organisation, team or the wider community. The first quote defines leadership as giving herself to others. Selfless leadership is something that is debated and discussed in the most recent paper by Normore & Brookes (2014).we

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are left with an impossible question is being a 'selfless leader' an impossible ideal? The following quote from White woman leader moves us away from selfless leadership into a different area of discussion:

> I think leadership for me is really about accountability responsibility, so a leader I think can be anywhere in any part of any organisation. But a leader is somebody who is prepared to step forward to take accountability and to take responsibility for change largely. (Senior White woman leader 2012)

This quote suggests that leadership is all about accountability and responsibility. However, the above account does not help us to understand who the words are being directed towards. It raises the question, what is the leader being held accountable and responsible for? Is it for the overall welfare for staff within the organisation including ensuring that the cultural difference is part of the strategic objectives? If this is the case then there are many papers that explore leadership in these terms. What is disturbing in this definition is that the leader does not mention the importance of being accountable and taking responsibility is also to ensure that equality and diversity provides an effective organisation. The following quote from a Senior Asian leader moves us back into the need to understand the group as well as one's own identity:

> There is a need to adapt leadership style. As much as it is your own identity, you would need to change the way you respond and react depending on where you are placed (in a different culture/environment). (Senior Asian woman leader)

The following account supports the notion that leadership is based on an individual approach with the expectation that others will follow:

> I would define leadership. As somebody who sets a good example to others by the way that they act and therefore people want to follow them. (Senior White woman leader 2012)

On the surface, there is nothing concerning about either of the accounts given by the senior White women leaders if we agree that leadership is about accountability, responsibility and the need to move the organisations objectives from the drawing board into the reality. What is of particular interest in this study is the way in which both BME and White leaders openly define leadership. Many of the White women's definitions of leadership as having strategic characteristics that include words such as 'vision charismatic' which appeared to be more about the personality than their own identity. In contrast the BME women leaders rarely used these words and instead had more of a focus on leadership and identity.

When the women were asked to provide a workable definition for leadership the answers that they gave were not clear cut. Instead there was a mixture of culturally related answers that would not fit the normal discussion around leadership. The data indicates that BME leaders demonstrate that their identity did form part of their chosen leadership style. Many of the BME women leaders used collaborative words as they wanted to reach out and bring people along to understand and engage in their vision. This raises a question – is the BME women's account of their leadership style placed into more of a gendered approach, are these women more in touch with how women are perceived to be leaders? If so is the white women's understanding of leadership formulated on a

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more traditional approach to leadership? Which could then explain the lack of cultural awareness in their definitions?

The BME women leaders were able to demonstrate that the acknowledgement of difference as an important aspect of their leadership style and is integral to being able to lead people. The following account illustrates this:

> As somebody who is able to meet fundamental human needs so that the team or individual or the organisation are able to achieve work goals and maximise on effectiveness… (Senior Asian Woman)

> I think this is actually a role or term that involves giving people a clear definition of where you are going, of what you do and how you get there and also particularly embedding your values and beliefs ... (Senior Asian Woman)

This woman continues her account:

> It is not just about giving the definition of what you want to be or what your organisation is to be, it is actually the values and steps you do to get there and the way in which you behave to get there I think is a particularly important part of the world of leadership. (Asian Woman Leader)

Many of the women spoke about leading diverse groups of women and how that impacted on what they saw as leadership. Interesting some were at odds with defining themselves as leaders and referred to the western concept of leadership to assist with denying that they were already leaders.

Others had more of a clearer understanding of what they considered leadership to be (or not, in the case of the third quotation):

> I think 'leadership' you have to lead people and management is managing systems and that's the way I have simplified it for myself. Trying to manage people is a total different concept than trying to lead people. Leadership is hard to define but you know when you have got it right. (Asian woman leader)

> You have to make people respect you and it is a lot involved, its time, you have to have that time to make people respect you, and your own black people as well. (BME woman leader)

> … you when I first came I had always said and she did it like this (claps hands), I would never let a Black woman lead me, never have a black boss' and she said, I am telling you, I am still here,' and that is all she said, 'I am still here'. (BME woman leader)

There were other women that viewed leadership as the opportunities that you are given through both the external and internal factors of socialisation. In other words, the nature versus nurture debate of whether you are born a natural leader or can be developed as leaders:

> I think it is the opportunities that you get in life and I think leadership to me is helping, it is not someone physically giving you a helping hand, but not having too many obstacles that are insurmountable really, to help you get on and I think that leadership is having the passion to make things better. (BME women leader)

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However, there was an agreement amongst the women that leadership was defined by the culture of the organisation – which in most cases was the western model of leadership, white and male.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the methodology developed for this research project opened up a conversation with BME and White female leaders to have a series of difficult discussions on an area which would normally be swept under the carpet. There were, of course, limitations to the research design which made it difficult to capture the rich data being shared by the female leaders. For example, the focus groups were designed to include 10 participants with the intention of running just six. However, as people started to hear about the project, interest began to grow and more people wanted to attend the focus group. One meeting attracted over 25 women which was captured on audiotape and flip chart. I was the person collecting the data and facilitating the discussion which was at times hard.

To sum up, the main finding of this study has been the revealing of considerable difficulties and disappointment among BME women in their role as leaders across a range of sectors of employment in the UK.

Although white women leaders also experienced challenges, due largely to their gender or class, the challenges were considerably more numerous and severe among BME women leaders – many of whom felt they had encountered racial prejudice and discrimination at work which hampered their progress as leaders. They felt that the general organisational culture of their employers was not friendly to BME women in leadership positions, such that the large majority of them saw the need to abandon their own culture and assume the dominant culture of their organisation.

Some of the BME women felt that their leadership style was being questioned in the eyes of others who hold stereotypical and prejudiced views on women from BME backgrounds. This resulted in lack of confidence in some BME women shown by their hesitancy to acknowledge themselves as leaders. BME women leaders also experienced lack of support from line managers, who were not seen as being culturally sensitive to the needs of a diverse team, and they also felt there was a lack of mentoring from within their organizations to help them progress.

There were also clear differences between the white and BME women's construction of leadership and their leadership styles. Both ethnicity and personal identity appeared to play an integral part in the BME women's definition of leadership, in stark contrast to the white women. Concerning leadership style, the BME women tended to enact leadership according to the feminine collaborative model, adopting a more caring, supportive role, whereas the white women were more likely to refer to the traditional male model when describing leadership qualities.

An interesting aspect was many of the white women leaders' apparent lack of awareness of the privilege that their whiteness bestowed on them – something most of them appeared not to have considered before. Where the white women reported difficulties, these tended to be attributed to their gender or their social class. The BME women also mentioned gender discrimination – but were far more vociferous about racial barriers.

These findings provide an interesting overview of the intersectionality between race, gender, class and identity among white and BME women leaders in the UK. The study has examined the mixed fortunes of BME and white women leaders of different social classes through the voices of the women themselves. We conclude that identities forged of class, race and gender have significant

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influences on the women's career trajectories, their constructions of leadership, and how they view themselves as leaders.

The study indicates the need for further research to explore the leadership positions of BME leaders. In addition, it is recommended that further work should be carried out in organisations to unlock the barriers that potentially stop BME women leaders moving ahead as fast as their female and male counterparts. Individuals and line managers need to consider engaging in culturally sensitive training to enable them to maximise the potential that BME women leaders can bring to their organisations. Employers should use workplace data to identify demographic information on BME women at different levels within their organisations and identify where development/interventions are needed, and to map progression rates and create inclusive action plans. Furthermore, individuals and employers should consider introducing mentoring opportunities and network circles to encourage BAME women to network and give them a forum to discuss particular issues and challenges they face in the workplace.

The positive aspect of the project is that there was such a surge of interest as the female leaders took the opportunity to share and discuss each of their individual experiences. Developing the research design using the researcher's autobiographical account as the hypothesis offered a spontaneous insight into the experiences of the BME and White women leaders. Using an organic approach enables to capture the many different voices across different settings. The methodology adds to the world of leadership as it offers leaders across sectors to have the difficult conversations with other leaders. The methodology is evolving and will be horned and used as a basis in other projects.

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