

Decolonising career guidance: Experiences of female, BAME career guidance professionals through the lens of intersectionality theory

Vaidehi Ranavaya

This article explores a small-scale study on the experiences of female, BAME career guidance professionals in the workplace through the lens of intersectionality theory. Currently, there is a lack of literature on this highlighting the importance of researching this. The article starts with the introduction, rationale and significance of research into this area and the importance of decolonising methodology. The findings reveal perceptions of unfair treatment, stereotyping, unconscious bias, discrimination and more. They highlight how these experiences are woven together through intersectionality which can result in compounding challenges. This is then followed by recommendations.



Introduction

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women make up 16% of the female working-age population in England and Wales (BITC, 2020). Despite this, their voices are largely absent in workplace equality discourse and research, which tends to focus on the experiences of White women or White men (Opara et al., 2020). In the career guidance sector, the camera rarely pans to the career guidance professional and their experiences (Yates et al., 2017) let alone female, BAME career guidance professionals.

This study was carried out from January to September 2021 as part of my master's degree dissertation

and was approved by Nottingham Trent University's ethics committee. It explores female, BAME career guidance professionals' experiences and challenges in the career guidance workplace through the lens of intersectionality theory.

Literature review

Intersectionality theory

Intersectionality is the concept that two or more dimensions of identity, such as gender and ethnicity, result in multiple, complex and intertwined layers of discrimination or disadvantage (Syed and Özbilgin, 2015). Understanding the experiences of female and BAME career guidance professionals through this lens can help reveal how the identity of female and BAME interact in intersecting systems of oppression (Turner, 2011). Research demonstrates that racism and sexism are interconnected and cannot be understood separately (Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006). Crenshaw (1989, cited in Tariq and Syed, 2017) argues that women have multiple layered facets and there is no one size fits all model. This means that not all ethnic minority women experience the same levels of racism or sexism. It varies between different ethnic groups as well as within. It is also important to note other factors such as socioeconomic status and age which are beyond the scope of this research.

Unfair treatment

Research shows that workplace gender equality has not been achieved (Doldor et al., 2016). The Trades Union Congress (TUC) found that 45% of BAME

women have experienced unfair treatment in the workplace compared to their White counterparts (2020) which is corroborated by the McGregor-Smith Review (2017).

Lack of access to mentors, mentoring support and compounding challenges

Further findings showed the difficulty in accessing a network and mentoring support (Tariq and Syed, 2017). The McGregor-Smith Review (2017) signifies how challenges can compound. The underrepresentation of BAME women in the workplace can cause a lack of role models at higher levels to guide, making it difficult for BAME women to progress. This demonstrates how these complex challenges are woven together. The career guidance sector is female-dominated and so there may be access to female role models however there is still a lack of diversity (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2021).

Unconscious bias and microaggressions

Unconscious bias refers to biases people hold outside of their conscious awareness (Torino et al., 2018). Microaggressions are 'hurtful, demeaning, and dismissive words and actions committed by one individual or group against another whose characteristics and backgrounds are different' (Bellack, 2015, p. S63). For example, someone saying that a Black person is 'well-spoken' implies that they were not expected to have those skills (Pitcan et al., 2018).

Research found that in the workplace, BAME women experienced negative assumptions on how they should behave (Opara et al., 2020). A study by the Guardian (Booth and Mohdin 2018; Booth et al., 2018) found that, because of their ethnicity, 38% of BAME people felt they needed to change their appearance and 37% of BAME people felt they needed to change their voice. Further, 32% of BAME women felt they were treated differently because of appearance, hairstyle and clothing compared to 9% of White respondents.

Impact of the challenges: Mental health and lack of confidence

These compounding challenges can result in negative experiences. The McGregor-Smith Review (2017)

highlights that BAME people have lower expectations from their careers because of difficulty in career progression and unequal access to opportunities for career development. The TUC research (2020) emphasizes the compounding effect of racism and sexism which can negatively impact BAME women's confidence in the workplace as well as their physical and mental health. Research (Ali and Inko-Tariah, 2020) found that BAME people suffered from stress, lack of confidence, low self-esteem, perfectionism, fear of vulnerability among other limiting mindsets emphasizing the negative wellbeing and career outcomes.

Decolonisation

Decolonising refers to the undoing of colonial rule over subordinate countries. In the past, there have been predatory, exploitative behaviour towards indigenous communities which, in research, has led to inaccurate stereotypes of indigenous people (Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021). Western researchers have a history of claiming ownership of indigenous knowledge as well as denying indigenous community's claim to self-determination. Some scholars are therefore paving the path to call for decolonisation, a process which involves examining and being critical of underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practice (Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021).

Decolonisation has also now taken a wider meaning of recognising and transforming our minds from colonial ideology. Decolonisation research means 'centering concerns and world views of non-western individuals' (Datta, 2018).

Decolonisation further allows us to examine our biases and challenge and transform dominant ways (Datta, 2018) of thinking. For example, unconscious biases and microaggressions typically relate to the perceptions of individuals. Because of this, these instances are difficult to label as discrimination and could be misjudged as simply perceptions of an individual which may not hold true to reality. This may be true to an extent however writing it off immediately can be damaging. Decolonisation calls for us to understand the experiences of the BAME community without invalidating them based on our biases.

In the career guidance sector, there is a lack of literature on the voices of female, BAME career guidance professionals. Therefore the first step to decolonising career guidance is to allow for underrepresented voices in this community to be represented in literature. The need to decolonise the profession is more important now than ever. The lack of female, BAME professionals' voices in the career guidance literature raises the question of the extent to which these challenges exist in the guidance sector.

Methods

This study is rooted in the interpretivist paradigm. Seven participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Participants had to identify as female and BAME and be qualified to level 6 or 7 whilst working in schools or colleges in the UK. Participants took part in semi-structured interviews through video conferencing which were recorded, transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

This study also incorporates elements of decolonising methodology such as critical reflexivity, transparency and respect for self-determination (Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021). Often in research, there is a power imbalance between researchers and participants. This would be further heightened if White men researched BAME women for example. With myself not being an 'outsider', the power dynamic is reduced. Additionally, there may be a divide in privilege and access to opportunities. This was recognised and efforts were made to minimise this power imbalance through being reflexive, transparent and open to dialogue throughout the research process. Furthermore, consent, ethical considerations and autonomous decision making are crucial. The purpose of this methodology and research is to ensure each participant's experiences and struggles are not minimised (Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021).

Decolonising methodology is important as it allows the sharing of experiences of those from minority ethnic backgrounds in the careers profession as a way to start a discourse. It allows us to recognise the lack of literature on BAME women's experiences, to question this and finally to start dialogue through shared solidarity of experiences and struggle against oppression, discrimination and racism.

Findings and discussion

Experiences of being a female career guidance professional

Female dominated environment: Five participants (Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7) acknowledged that they work in a female-dominated role (and sector) and that people expect a career guidance professional to be a woman (Participants 1 and 4). Because of this, there has been little impact for most.

Discrimination: Participant 7 experienced discrimination and unfair treatment from a male colleague due to being a woman in her role leading her to feel unsafe, isolated and vulnerable. She argues that this was dealt with very well by the school she works at however believes her professional experience as a woman is different from that of male colleagues. She also perceives being treated unfairly on her master's course by peers. Though this is only one individual's experience, this coincides with literature (TUC, 2020; Opara et al., 2020) that found BAME women are more likely to experience unfair treatment and discrimination.

Unconscious bias and microaggressions: In contrast, several participants described instances of subtle microaggressions such as being described as a 'frail woman' (Participant 3), feeling talked down by older white male staff (Participant 6), and feeling that they are treated differently because of being female (Participant 4 and 7).

Participant 4 believes that if she had been male, she would have been respected and listened to by male staff as opposed to being stereotyped as thinking 'emotionally'. This led to anger and decline in mental health. She recognised that this could be due to the intersection of being young, in a junior role as well as being female and BAME.

Participant 5 believes that unconscious bias plays a role in who is promoted and Participant 4 further perceived stereotyping in the recruitment process where she felt that senior male staff wanted someone 'caring, sweet and friendly' as opposed to a more 'forthright' candidate, where both candidates were female and qualified.

These perceptions align with literature that found that BAME women were not taken seriously and experienced sexist remarks (Tariq and Syed, 2017) and that BAME women felt they were treated differently due to appearance, hairstyle and clothing (Booth and Mohdin 2018; Booth et al., 2018).

Progression and gender pay gap: Participant 4 argued that in her experience, when looking upwards to progress, she felt those in higher positions were predominantly male. This is interesting as career guidance is seen as a predominantly female sector (Gatsby Charitable Trust, 2021) indicating that perhaps there needs to be transparency and investigation into roles higher up to see if they are male dominated. She further notes that if she was male, she would be promoted easily. Similarly, Participant 5 argues that when it comes to progression, she feels that male colleagues move up the ladder quicker and that unconscious bias plays a role in who is promoted. The impact of this is making her feel disvalued especially seeing male career guidance professionals with less experience than female professionals being promoted.

Positive experiences: For five participants, being a woman in their role is helpful. Participant 1 emphasized that being in a predominantly female sector, she is not made to feel out of place. Participants 2, 3 and 4 highlighted that students open up more to them than they would if it was a male professional and Participant 7 believes that she is seen as a role model to female students. For Participants 5 and 6, being a woman in their role has not helped as it has had little impact on their role.

When asked about overall experiences of being a woman in their role, only one expressed it being negative while the others were split between positive and neutral.

Experiences and challenges of being a BAME career guidance professional

Racist beliefs can lead to discrimination, even if they are unconscious biases rather than overt prejudices. These prejudices often stem from colonial-era beliefs (Dennis, 1995) where the populations of subjugated countries were classified as inferior based on their physical features such as the colour of their skin. False

and damaging world views were promoted as scientific facts such as the human population comprising of different races separated by skin colour rather than one species 'Homo Sapiens' (Dennis, 1995). Over time, this belief has led to the propagation of racist beliefs and unconscious biases. Recognising these discriminatory beliefs, even in oneself, and making an effort to unlearn them is part of the decolonisation process. Without awareness of the existence of discrimination in the workplace, it would be impossible to begin decolonising the career guidance sector. As a result, part of this research involved documenting the experiences faced by female, BAME career guidance professionals, both negative and positive.

Racism and discrimination: Two participants described experiences of racism or discrimination. Participant 5 describes instances where parents did not want to work with her because of her skin colour but noted little impact on her as it was handled well by the organisation. Participant 7 describes several instances of racism including during her master's course by peers and in the workplace by external people. She describes feeling that she was unwanted in her local community yet still had to maintain professionalism. She considered these experiences were due to her being BAME, female, young, educated and in a school serving a predominantly White middle-class community which shows an intersection of factors (Syed and Özbilgin, 2015).

These perceptions of the participants echo the literature which found that BAME women experience unfair treatment, racism and discrimination in the workplace (McGregor-Smith, 2017; TUC, 2020) suggesting that this may exist in the career guidance sector.

Unconscious bias and microaggressions:

Participants described instances of unconscious bias and microaggressions as subtle and difficult to label. Participant 1 questions instances and whether it is because she is young, Black or a woman that is causing it indicating the difficulty in labelling and compounding intersections. She further questions if she is in her role as a 'diversity tick' making her feel she may not deserve it. This shows her perceptions of unconscious bias which aligns with literature (Pitcan et al., 2018; Tariq and Syed, 2017).

Participant 5 described her perception of being praised for something in a patronising manner, illustrating an unconscious bias described in literature where she was not expected to do well due to assumptions about how BAME women should behave (Opara et al., 2020).

Participant 6 discussed an instance where she was underpaid whilst a White colleague was paid more despite her feeling that she worked harder. This had a huge impact on her leading her to feel undervalued and hurt. This coincides with literature that highlighted that BAME people are underpaid and undervalued (McGregor-Smith, 2017) suggesting that this could be a barrier for BAME women in the career guidance sector.

Participant 6, a Black woman, experienced comments regarding her hair, both positive and negative. She described an instance, in school, of someone asking to touch her hair and then proceeding to touch it without consent. This demoralising experience illustrates how this form of racism may still exist in the career guidance sector. Participant 4, a Black woman, further described as feeling more comfortable whilst working from home as she could style her natural hair the way she wanted to. She feels extremely anxious that people will perceive her to be unprofessional because of her natural appearance.

Participant 6 expresses herself differently in the way she speaks and Participant 4 feels she has a 'posh' accent and feels she is 'white enough to be accepted'. She identifies her private education and manner of speech as privileges that make it easier for her compared to other people who may be Black.

Both participants are Black indicating that this may be a barrier specifically for Black professionals with regards to appearance and unconscious bias impacting on mental health. These perceptions coincide with literature that showed BAME women's appearance can be seen as unprofessional as they felt they needed to change their appearance or voice (Booth and Mohdin 2018; Booth et al., 2018).

The need to work harder: Three participants felt that they needed to work harder because of being BAME. Participant 5 feels she needs to put her 'best foot forward' and work harder to prove herself in fear of something going wrong and to ensure she is

seen as a professional. Participant 6 also feels the need to work harder and 'over qualify' herself to prevent people from thinking less of her. Participant 7 further feels that being BAME means she must work twice as hard. These perceptions coincide with literature in that BAME people are more likely to feel they need to work a lot harder for the same recognition (McGregor-Smith, 2017; Tariq and Syed, 2017).

Confidence: Confidence was perceived as a necessity for a BAME person to have in the workplace (Participant 1, 3, 5, and 6). Participant 3 indicates little impact of racial discrimination or microaggressions as she grew up in Jamaica and notes that the experiences of those growing up in the UK 'under the thumb of racism' may be different and recognises her privilege of being educated and having confidence. However, what about professionals who may not have the same confidence or are deeply impacted by this?

Participant 1 recognised that navigating careers is difficult and that confidence is needed for BAME people. She also feels that confidence is needed tenfold if someone is BAME and a woman which aligns with intersectionality theory. Participant 5 noted that BAME professionals must be confident or they may be judged or misunderstood and that the fear of something going wrong is very apparent.

This coincides with literature (Ali and Inko-Tariah, 2020) and suggests a certain level of confidence may be needed to navigate these situations and if it is not present, it can cause negative career and wellbeing outcomes (McGregor-Smith, 2017).

Progression and lack of role models: Participant 5 identified a barrier for progression as she does not see anyone like her in higher roles, so questions why she would want to go for it. She expressed that if there is more diversity in higher roles and mentors who are 'pulling you up' and not 'slamming the door shut' then it can increase confidence and belief that they can also progress. Though this is the perception of one individual, this aligns with literature discussed in that BAME people face huge barriers in advancing in their career and this can be exacerbated due to a lack of role models or mentors (McGregor-Smith, 2017). The career guidance sector is not diverse (Gatsby Charitable Trust, 2021) and so the implication

is that it may be difficult for BAME women to have access to role models in higher-up positions hindering opportunities to advance in their careers.

Positive experiences: The participants also detailed their positive experiences as BAME professionals. Participants 1 and 7 feel passionate about being role models to other BAME students and Participant 1 recognises that BAME students are likely to be more eager to speak with her. This overpowers the challenges of being BAME and has highlighted a need for more BAME career guidance professionals. This is also recognised by Participant 4 who believes she can tap into a community of BAME people in her role. These findings can be linked to literature that found positive experiences of being BAME can help to have access to cultural knowledge and be able to relate to other cultures (Opara et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Whilst positive experiences of being female and BAME were noted such as being able to support female and BAME students, tap into the BAME community and empower others, negative perceptions were also observed. Unconscious bias, discrimination, racism, difficulty in progression, lack of role models, the need to work harder and impact on mental health indicates the compounding challenges of being female and BAME. The intersection of these means higher levels of disadvantage as many of these challenges snowballed onto one another. There were varying levels of impact and when there was little impact, this was due to privileges of confidence and being educated. What about those who may not have this level of confidence?

These findings illustrated the perceptions of seven participants. In their experiences, instances of unconscious bias, unfair treatment and discrimination were observed. However, it cannot be concluded from this small-scale study whether they may persist in the career guidance sector on a larger scale. What can be concluded is that experiences vary from individual to individual and the complexity and diversity of these experiences, both negative and positive. Other factors such as age, socio-economic class, privilege and confidence may also impact these experiences.

This research aimed to introduce the concept of decolonisation, incorporate elements of decolonisation methodology and share these stories and perceptions. This itself is an act of decolonisation on career guidance as it sheds insight onto the experiences of seven BAME women in the career guidance sector.

The McGregor-Smith Review (2017) indicated that BAME people are discriminated against at every stage in their careers. This holds true to some of the experiences of participants and is worsened due to the intersection of being female and BAME. This highlights a need for further research into this to investigate the presence and prevalence of discrimination and racism in the workplace and in the hiring process. Are there unconscious biases preventing BAME women from progressing? If they do exist, how can we ensure that BAME women are supported and have access to role models? How can we remove barriers to ensure progression, support BAME women's career decision making and improve wellbeing and career outcomes? After all, BAME women are clients in their own journey and make up 16% of the female working-age population in England and Wales (BITC, 2020).

Considering this, recommendations can be made to begin the process of decolonisation. Larger scale research should be undertaken to investigate the experiences of BAME women and determine the prevalence and impact of discrimination, racism and unconscious bias. A support network should be set up for BAME women in the career guidance sector so that they may share ideas and learn from one another in a safe space. Mentoring programmes should be developed for BAME women in the career guidance sector with role models. Training providers should assess their courses on career development to ensure the topic of equality is given adequate attention.



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For correspondence

Vaidehi Ranavaya RCDP
Career guidance professional at Stalham High School
and Sheringham Sixth Form
v_ranavaya@hotmail.co.uk