

Portraits of Black Achievement: Composing Successful Careers

Jacqui MacDonald

Portraits of Black Achievement: composing successful careers arose from the need for greater public awareness of the contribution that black people make in Britain in the face of widespread media coverage of black under-achievement.

Initially conceived as a resource for young people making life and career decisions, the project has yielded material of value and interest to a wide readership. It provides a series of accessible and personal narratives of black achievers in the UK. We can all learn individually from these accounts which also contribute to a wider debate on issues related to access, inclusion and achievement.

Research background

A database of some 300 names was assembled, and an initial mail-out, consisting of an explanatory letter and a questionnaire, was completed. Prerequisites included the need to have been born in the UK or a resident since the late 1940s and to have achieved a recognised professional status within their field.

Interviews were arranged with individuals covering a broad range of occupational categories and reflecting many regions of the UK. Those interviewed covered a spectrum of age (25 - 70), gender and background and their experiences demonstrate that there is no simple formula to achieving success. Interviews with seventy individuals took place over an eighteen-month period, and were based on information from the questionnaires and a question list. The latter was re-designed after initial interviews. Interviews were of one to two hours' duration and were recorded. They were then transcribed verbatim.

Full-length transcripts were read and key sections identified. A shortened version of each interview was then produced, using as much as possible of the actual words spoken by the interviewee. Drafts were then forwarded to the interviewees for amendment and approval. Final drafts incorporated the interviewees' alterations and suggestions.

Robert Taylor, a national black photographer, took a black-and-white photograph of each interviewee encapsulating their character and personality.

Introduction

As a black person, born in South London of African Caribbean heritage, I am concerned with the emphasis on black under-achievement and the lack of acknowledgement of black success. I wanted to redress the balance and inspire young people in their career and life choices. This collection of interviews demonstrates the positive contribution that

black people are making in Britain whilst pursuing a path to personal fulfilment. The interviewees discuss life experiences including family, education, work, the idea of a black community, and what it means to be black and professional in the UK. Some of the material and views expressed challenge beliefs and attitudes held by both white and black communities.

The first person accounts provide a revealing glimpse of the experiences of these individuals as they explore what has motivated them to compose their careers. For the majority of those interviewed, life has not been plain sailing, but one of struggle and dogged determination. They, like the generation before them, have helped pave the way for subsequent generations to open up more chances and opportunities to realise their potential.

The reasons some black people achieve against the odds are complex. A number of questions might be considered. What sort of individuals succeed? Is it to do with their personality or general characteristics? Is it serendipity, or the era in which they were born? Is luck a factor? Is it the professions they choose? Is there networking going on behind the scenes? Understanding this complex set of factors is of great importance to me as a black woman, as a teacher, as someone who worked within the youth service and as a consultant to the careers service. My particular interest is in the position and status of black people in Britain and the stories these individuals tell.

Reflections

My book challenges the assumption that oppressed people cannot be empowered, and are therefore incapable of being successful. Many black people living in the UK have achieved status in their professional lives; but their success has not been achieved easily. It has occurred as a result of individuals composing or constructing their own careers.

Many of the individuals featured in this book have had a number of work experiences before opportunities, perhaps even luck, guided them to their current professions.

What is interesting about their reflections is how they have defined their success. For some, it is about 'achieving against all the odds' while for others it is 'not being afraid to make mistakes'. Whilst recognising they are successful, one or two felt that had they been white and/or male, their achievement would have been much more significant. Success is seen as being very much about personal gratification.

These individuals do not regard themselves as role models. Far from it, they are individuals who have worked hard and kept focused despite conflicting pressure. With sheer determination they have achieved respect and recognition in their field. As one of the interviewees put it:

'Being the only black person makes you incredibly strong and resourceful. You don't need anyone else's acknowledgement that you're okay because you know you've fought and you've got this far'.

What is striking is that none of those interviewed is complacent about their achievements. They do not want to dwell on the fact that they are black, but wish to be recognised first and foremost for their achievements in often challenging climates. They speak from a black perspective, but do not represent all black experiences.

As black achievers, they seek acknowledgement, respect and a chance to get on like anybody else. Their dreams, hopes and ambitions are no different from those of any other ethnic group. Some told of their humble beginnings and the strength and importance of extended families. The strict upbringing, of which some spoke, did not hinder their success. In fact, it may have contributed to it. Whilst some came from middle class homes, all came from backgrounds where there was an expectation that they would at least try their best and recognition that this might be against the odds.

All recognise there is racism within society, but do not wish to dwell on it. The main question for them is 'What can you do about it?'. They had used a number of strategies to overcome their obstacles and these are described in the interviews.

Key themes

A number of themes emerged in the production of this book. They include:

- **Identity**

How individuals identified themselves in terms of colour and their profession, depended upon who one spoke with. Is this individual a professional who happens to be black

or a black person who is also a professional and successful? Does identity really matter and, if so, for whom?

- **A black elite as well as a black middle class**

Are we seeing the public emergence of a black elite? Is there a black middle class or merely a black professional group? Many felt uncomfortable being referred to as 'black middle class' whereas others clearly saw themselves as a member of that group.

- **Professional success**

Professional success brings its own complexities. There is also an issue of gender and race and how one is treated at work as well as the games people play in order to succeed.

- **Making choices**

No single factor influences the career choices that individuals make, that is, whether to aim high or to give up and give in to the stereotype of black under-achievement. Educational attainment, family background, gender, race, opportunities (serendipity) as well as economic and social structures are all factors that contribute to determining the direction an individual will take.

Family or school networks allow some individuals to access certain jobs, but not for the individuals in this book. Most grew up in an era when media coverage indirectly influenced their conceptions as to the jobs that were open to people like them.

Several commented on the objective and fair advice given to them in schools by teachers. For most their dreams and aspirations remained almost closely guarded secrets with little parental understanding or support. For others their school experiences and significant individuals inspired and sometimes served to spur them on in their determination to prove themselves.

The ideal scenario that involves planned decision making was certainly not the case for the individuals we interviewed. There were those whose plans bore little resemblance to actual outcomes; many reacted to serendipitous opportunities and turned them to their advantage. The issue is that whilst perhaps their experience is no different to other groups, they saw and seized opportunities and proved success was possible.

- **Strategies**

Their accounts demonstrate the importance of knowing how to play the game, gaining the skills to play the system to their advantage rather than surrendering before the end of the first round. Other strategies used by individuals in their pursuit of success included self-employment, becoming independent of a structure that ultimately restricts, as a result enhancing their creativity and status.

• Race and racism

Race did not emerge as a central theme in the interviews. Most did not make explicit reference to it at all but where they did their views were forceful. Whilst all those interviewed recognised racism within society, they spoke more or less with one voice when they suggested that the black community must fight its own corner. They believed that the black community needs to be more unified, and should not expect too much from outside; it is not enough to demand what society needs to do, but there is a need to address more importantly what black people need to do for themselves.

• The role of parents and families

All participants were unanimous in their belief that parents/families have a role to play in the positive experiences and achievements of their children.

What next?

Through the accounts of these individuals, the complexities of being a black professional in the UK are emerging. There are no quick fixes, but we can't lose hope. As Janet Daley wrote in *The Daily Telegraph* on 22nd August 2000:

'By rendering invisible the quiet achievements of black women and decent black men, the media cult of the black delinquent prevents young Afro-Caribbean men from seeing themselves as succeeding in any arena other than the criminal street'.

There are lessons here for a number of agencies; schools need to acknowledge the prevailing economic and social structures, and to use this knowledge in the planning and delivery of a more progressive curriculum which includes a comprehensive careers education and guidance programme for young people.

Parents have a role to play in encouraging and supporting their children, even when they too might be unclear as to what is at stake or are trying to make sense of the system for themselves. It is not sufficient to expect schools to provide all the encouragement and directions that will allow young black people to aspire to prestigious and fulfilling work.

Our participants talked of the need to challenge low expectations and encourage high expectations and for all agencies to find ways in which young people can be empowered and develop their self-respect and confidence. Some spoke of the need for families to maintain links with their ancestral 'homes' and to encourage exploratory visits. In fact, one or two argued that it is not the role of the school to go out of its way to teach black history, but something that the home should be addressing. The school's role is to provide a curriculum which would nurture young people towards success.

Professor Errol Miller argue that there is no single factor to explain institutional inequalities. It is the interaction between a number of social criteria such as gender, race, class, religion and geographical location, which influences the development of individuals. Miller contends that it is impossible to completely level the playing field which will always be tilted in favour of the dominant group.

'All we as educators, family and others can do is to help young people address the issue of power structures... It is not the hand that the individual is dealt that is important, but how they deal with that hand...' (Open lecture at the Institute of Education, 17th October 2000.)

What has been missing for many years has been a positive portrayal of black achievement. This is not to deny the discrimination that black people continually face, but to promote the achievements and successes which are overlooked by schools, the media and society in general. There is a need to positively demonstrate that black people can and do achieve at the highest level.

'Young people must be helped to construct their own future, recognise the disadvantages, but helped to be creative and productive in their thinking in order to move on... We have underestimated what is required to be successful' (ibid. Miller).

In this book, I set out to examine not only the ways in which this group of black professionals composed their careers, but also the complexities of being a black professional in the UK and how their success masks issues of inequality in our society. The question is how do we move from the diagnosis that inequality exists to identifying specific contextual treatment? I describe this plight of black people as the 5Ds of black youth: disadvantaged, disaffected, disillusioned, disruptive and disappeared. I hope the book goes some way towards dispelling this blanket view of black people.

Note

Jacqui MacDonald is a NICEC Associate. This article is based on an edited version of the introduction to *Portraits of Black Achievement: composing successful careers* published by Lifetime Careers Publishing in 2001.

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