How is 'racism' understood in literature about the experiences of black and minority ethnic social work students in Britain? A conceptual review

Abstract

This conceptual review interrogates a body of literature concerned with black and minority ethnic (BME) social work students in Britain since 2008. This period has coincided with an increasing focus on diversity in Higher Education, but also lower prominence being given to race in social work. In social work education, there has been increased attention to the needs and experiences of BME students. While most of this literature acknowledges racism, what constitutes racism and how it can be understood usually remain implicit. This review aimed to explore influential concepts in the literature and the ways these affected how racism is understood and identified.

A search was carried out for articles in peer-reviewed academic journals between 2008 and 2018. In this article we discuss four recurring concepts of racism in this literature: subtle racism, institutional racism, cultural difference and pedagogical solutions.

The article analyses the assumptions underpinning these concepts, and the implications for how racism has been understood and investigated in this literature. The subsequent discussion calls for a more reflexive approach and identifies questions that future research could explore, which could lead to improved understandings of racism in social work education.

Introduction

There is widespread recognition that social workers in Britain serve a diverse population. At the same time, discussion about race and racism is less prominent in social work practice and education in Britain now than in the past (Lavalette and Penketh, 2013, Williams and Parrott, 2013). Some discussions of social work *practice* have maintained a useful focus on race (Bhatti-Sinclair, 2011 and Singh et al., 2013). However, in social work education policy, the anti-racism of the 1990s has been displaced by a discourse of diversity, equality and cultural competence (Singh, 2013). This is evident in the current version of the *Professional Capabilities Framework*, which influences social work curricula in England, where race is referred to simply as one dimension of diversity (BASW, 2018, p. 14). This version of diversity produces a focus on experience and identity, rather than power and inequality as they operate in material and historical contexts (Singh, 2013). This changing focus in social work has coincided with an institutional response in universities which is driven by economic and business imperatives rather than a moral case for increasing diversity (Clifford & Royce, 2008). As Sara Ahmed (2012, 2015) has argued, when diversity functions as evidence of institutional inclusivity, as it does in contemporary British universities, an environment is created which is potentially more hostile to black and minority ethnic (BME) staff and students, because it becomes more difficult to articulate the effects of whiteness or raise issues of racism.

In this increasingly complex and constraining context for discussion about race, in our initial searches, we noted the emergence of a body of literature and research since 2008, focusing on BME students of social work. This literature evidences educators' ongoing commitment to respond positively to a diverse student population. However, this does not, in itself, ensure greater insights into how race functions in contemporary social work education contexts. We believe it is important to subject this body of work to critical review and that a conceptual review of this literature is timely.

Methodology

The purpose of this review was to identify dominant conceptual frames implicit in literature about BME students. Conceptual reviews are a way of revealing the combinations of tacit assumptions, unarticulated understandings and formal definitions in play in discussions about a topic. These influences mean that, while several texts appear to discuss the same issue, they might also understand it through different frames. Conceptual reviews are increasingly used in health and social care and take different forms, including those that review specific bodies of literature as we have done here (see also Bonavigo et al., 2016) and those that focus on themes or concepts, rather than the texts themselves (Mohatt et al., 2014).

We reviewed literature about BME students on social work programmes in Britain, seeking to include all peer-reviewed academic journals of the topic published from January 2008 to June 2018. We used three databases (Academic Search Premier, EBSCO and ASSIA), and the following keyword terms: black social work student*, social work education black, minorit* social work student*, rac* social work student*, rac* social work education, ethnic* social work education, ethnic* social work student*. We also carried out further hand searches of the contents pages of those journals that, between them, had published most of the relevant literature (*Social Work Education*, *Journal of Practice Teaching & Learning*, *British Journal of Social Work* and *Journal of Social Work*).

Terminology

We refer to 'Black and Minority Ethnic' or 'BME' because this is the most common terminology used to refer to the group of students on which the review focuses. We recognise the limitations of any one term for identifying those people who are at risk of experiencing racism, and we have included literature that uses other equivalent terms or refers to other groups within the category of BME students, for instance Black African students.

Findings and analysis

The search identified 18 articles that met our criteria. The process of analysis was inductive and interpretive—as any analysis of concepts must be, given they are implicit and inferred. Analysis was informed by a meta-ethnographic method (Noblit and Hare, 1988) in which an interpretive paradigm is extended to literature review. This allowed for a reconceptualization of the original questions addressed in research (Neal-Jackson, 2018). This meant identifying concepts that were influential in the articles but were neither explicit nor the objects of inquiry. Practical methods employed to achieve this were initial reading of all articles, noting key themes and the concepts of racism used, developing and, finally, refining the analysis of recurring concepts through re-reading and discussion.

Our review identified a number of significant terms and concepts in the literature, which were undefined and presented as self-evident in most texts. This finding is important in itself, and contrasts with discussions about the same topic in other countries (see for example Razack, 2001; Jeffrey, 2005). In what follows, we discuss four recurring and central concepts in the literature: subtle racism, institutional racism, cultural difference and pedagogical solutions.

Subtle racism

A recurrent concept in the literature is the subtlety of the racism experienced by BME social work students. For example, Masocha (2015, p. 638) notes that racism 'permeates through everyday life, social structures and practices', and this enables it to operate in 'subtle and insidious ways', most of which are 'not readily recognizable'. In their discussion of BME social work students' experiences in Scotland, Hillen and Levy (2011, p. 793) give a number of examples of the 'complexities and subtleties' of racism: BME students 'being laughed at for their pronunciation' in class and being rejected by potential placement providers 'in ways that suggested discrimination' (Hillen and Levy p. 793). Similarly, Thomas and colleagues' (2011, p. 47) article on supporting BME students in practice placements discusses how subtle aspects of social interactions work to marginalise students. They give examples of 'irritation in the tone of voice being used, being ignored within the team, or not greeted as other members of staff are' as ways that BME students are marginalised. 'Overt and subtle processes' are also an overarching theme in the Goldsmiths study of diversity on eight social work programmes (Bernard et al., 2011, p. 25).

Subtle racism is not seen as a lesser form of racism but as a primary mode through which racism operates. For example, Tedam's discussion of Black African students' experiences of racism on placement (2014b, p. 139) refers to the significance of 'subtle put-downs ... used as a means to perpetuate disregard for, and to undermine, minority groups', while Thomas and colleagues (2011, p. 47) refer to the '"dripping tap" effect' of repeated differential treatment, leading to 'appalling experiences' for some BME students, who fail placements because of racist treatment. Focusing on subtle racism enables authors to find evidence of the pervasiveness and normalisation of racialised inequalities in BME students' everyday experiences on social work programmes.

Social changes across the West since the 1970s, such as anti-racist activism and legislation outlawing some expressions of racism, have had a significant influence on how racism is manifested and experienced. Consequently, the subtlety of modern racisms has become a major focus of research in the social sciences, such as the subtle ways through which white identities continue to have privileged status, the invisibility of systems that reproduce racial inequalities, the promotion of superficial diversity as evidence of racial equality and the re-articulation of racism as justifiable concern about cultural differences (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). However, these aspects of subtle racism are not explored in most of the literature reviewed. Instead, the focus is more often on the subtle ways BME students are marginalised, demeaned or have their identity negated in social interactions, showing the influence of recent writing on

microaggressions (e.g. Sue et al., 2007). This literature makes two central assertions: that subtle forms of hostility can be more damaging than overtly racist statements, and that microaggressions occur whenever the victim experiences an interaction as about racism. Microaggressions literature is explicitly referenced by Masocha (2015) and Tedam (2014a; 2014b) each refer to microaggressions, but other authors similarly focus on subtle features of social interaction that are used to exclude, demean or negate BME people.

Microaggressions as a concept has been heavily criticised, by those who are dismissive of work on racism more generally (e.g. Nagai, 2017) but also writers concerned about its effectiveness as a frame for analysing the subtlety of contemporary racism (e.g. Wong et al., 2014; Lilienfeld, 2017). These critiques identify the lack of rigorous methodological grounding or evidence base for the concept, its use of 'aggression' as a frame for interpreting interpersonal relations even when racialising behaviours are unintentional, its focus on reports by victims as the sole required evidence of microaggression and its alleged effect of encouraging a 'victim culture'. In our view, microaggression is an inadequate frame for conceptualising subtle racism in social work education. It does not account for the significance of social and institutional contexts and, on its own, fails to encapsulate the many ways that contemporary racism operates in liberal institutions. Key elements in the microaggressions literature—the emphasis on psychological harm caused by subtle racism, the requirement to identify victims and perpetrators and the significance given to victim experience as the determining factor—pervade most of the literature we reviewed. Focusing on these elements shifts attention away from the subtle ways racism occurs in social work education in the UK. Examples are the mundane talk about cultural difference that is normative in many social work contexts and that does not feature clear victims or perpetrators, and practices that do not involve interactions with students and are largely invisible to them (academic assessment, allocation of placements, fitness to practise processes, practice assessment panels and examination boards). A contrasting approach to subtlety is taken in the Goldsmiths study (Bernard et al., 2013), which identified a number of subtle processes, such as group dynamics during classroom-based teaching that work to structure social relations and divide students in institutional spaces. These examples do not feature clear perpetrators and victims but work to racialise some students and establish unequal relations.

Institutional racism

Most of the papers make reference to institutional racism and, in almost all these discussions, it is presented as axiomatic: like racism more broadly, it is not seen to require clarification but

is used to indicate deep levels of concern. It therefore works in most accounts to heighten concerns while obscuring their causes. There are long-standing critiques of institutional racism as a conceptual frame. It is seen as minimising the significance of gender and class in social interactions involving racism (Miles, 1987) and subsuming disparate processes into a single concept, which therefore has little theoretical or political value (Williams, 1985). Institutional racism has been conceptualised differently in different fields. Its origins are as a sociological understanding of structural racism but it also functions as a legal concept and, in this context, it requires some reification of notions of race in order to function (Garner, 2017). An example of this is MacPherson's (1999) definition of institutional racism, which has been particularly influential in public services in Britain and, where there is detailed enough discussion to make a judgement, seems to have been influential in the literature about BME social work students. MacPherson's explanation of institutional racism has been criticised for at least two reasons: because it fails fully to acknowledge the role of individual agency in institutionally racist practices that involve some discretion or judgement by practitioners, and (as with the microaggressions literature) because it asserts that if victims identify actions as racist, then racism must have occurred (Anthias, 1999). This lack of clarity about the interaction between individual agency, social structures and institutional processes is evident in some of the social work literature. For example, Bartoli and colleagues (2008, p. 85) identify students' accounts of 'being covertly discriminated against and "oppressed", being monitored more closely than other white students ... stereotyping, [being] mistrusted and patronised' by practice teachers and assessors, both as 'most concerning' and as examples of institutional racism. This account does not explain why these are examples of *institutional* practices or explore the immediate contexts and interpersonal dynamics through which these occur. There is also a slippage from discussion about subtle racism to concluding institutional racism. For example, Hillen and Levy (2015, p. 793) give an example of white Scottish students avoiding working in groups with BME colleagues as evidence that racism is 'institutionalised and embedded in Scottish culture', without explaining why the Scottish nationhood is the most pertinent explanation for this. We recognise that institutions are significant here, but there is a lack of explanation of what is meant by institutional racism, and a lack of justification when particular forms of institution are signalled. For it to be useful, the research needs to attend more closely to particular institutional contexts (universities, local authorities, social work programmes etc), engaging in a more reflexive discussion of these institutions and their processes. Again, the Goldsmiths study is an exception because it offers a nuanced exploration of how specific institutions reproduce, exacerbate and tackle discrimination. Fletcher and colleagues (2015) identify how minority students are marginalised through university factors such as campus culture, educators' complacency about their own discriminatory behaviour and a focus on equality of access, rather than students' experiences

after they have enrolled. This study explores in detail how the processes of various formal and informal institutions interact to reinforce inequality for BME students and other minority groups on social work programmes.

Cultural difference

Cultural difference is a key concept in the literature on BME social work students. This is not surprising given cultural competence is now integral to what is considered to be good practice in health and social care (Harrison and Turner, 2011). Despite this importance, however, 'culture' remains a poorly defined concept.

Often, the literature focuses on the pedagogical implications of cultural difference for learning (see e.g. Bartoli et al., 2008; Bartoli, 2011, Tedam, 2012). For example, Bartoli (2011) examines data about African students' academic grades on a social work programme to draw conclusions about their perceptions of particular assessment methods, compared with how they performed—a potentially valuable focus given the lack of attention to this topic more broadly. Bartoli (2011, p. 52) claims there is evidence that African students 'perform and academically achieve differently'. She asserts a correlation between familiar assessment methods and performance, which accounted for why African students in the study performed better in examinations than in other forms of assessment. Students felt this was due to familiarity with examinations as a method of assessment. Here, 'culture draws a simple association between place of origin and educational experiences, but elsewhere Bartoli uses 'culture' to refer to professional identity: social work is described as having its 'own distinct culture defined by contextual history, political landscape, traditions and norms' (Bartoli, 2011, p. 52). This might appear to mark a turn away from othering accounts of cultural difference towards something more reflexive, except that Bartoli views African students' 'formative knowledge of social work practice [as] acquired through community based work within their countries or origin or ... care work', which she sees as 'a world apart from the realities of the complexities and bureaucracy surrounding contemporary UK social work practice' (Bartoli, 2011, p. 52). This is problematic for several reasons, particularly because the majority of new students on qualifying social work programmes, not just Black African students, will be unfamiliar with these complexities. The consequences of such discussions about 'differences' in learning are that difficulties or challenges experienced and identified by BME students are understood in terms of particular learning and support needs stemming from cultural

difference, whether that be ethnic difference from white British students or an alleged unfamiliarity with the professional culture of social work.

A similar problem is illustrated by Bartoli and colleagues' (2008) discussion of 15 Black African students' experiences of practice learning settings. This and other articles by Tedam (2014a, 2014b) provide a great deal of evidence about students' experiences of racism. However, the detailed recommendations proposed, such as incorporating international perspectives in teaching, developing a library of African texts, mentoring and shadowing experiences, do not directly address racism. The impact of racism on progression in practice placements is also described by Thomas and colleagues (2011). Again, the research finds evidence of racism operating in a range of different ways on placements, but the solutions offered include allowing more time for the BME student at the beginning of the placement 'to settle in and feel accepted by the agency' (p47). This avoids directly addressing the problems of racism which have been described and instead frames the difficulty in terms of intrinsic qualities of the student, such as their degree of comfort and confidence in unfamiliar surroundings.

Some problems emerge from concepts of culture in the literature. No explanations are offered of its meaning in educational, social work contexts or more generally. Graham (2009) notes that teaching about anti-racist social work in the UK and US has failed to engage with recent conceptualisations of culture in sociology, where culture is explored as a fluid process, constantly created and performed. This review also revealed that a theoretically informed perspective on culture is often missing and, instead, culture is treated as stable and indicative of identity, values, beliefs and even learning styles. Identity may be more helpfully viewed using a theoretical lens of 'positionality', which is a less fixed way of understanding identity and describes the 'multiple, overlapping and shifting identities that people construct and are ascribed.' (A. Ahmed, 2015, p. 38). This understanding of identity permits a consideration of individual agency and structural influences as we all define, redefine and create our identities. In contrast, 'culture' as it is often used in social work is a rather nebulous concept which can lead to one-dimensional and essentialist views of culture (Harrison & Turner, 2011). Culture is presented as neutral and apolitical (Sakamoto, 2007) not needing definition because its meaning is obvious. Working with students from 'other' cultures does not require a critical perspective on race, only knowledge of (superficial) aspects of the culture. Indeed, Pon (2009) argues that such fixed notions of culture are actually very similar to fixed biological notions of difference and argues that the move away from exclusionary discourses of biological 'race' to those of 'culture' is nevertheless constructing difference from the perspective of an unacknowledged norm.

In contrast to literature which focuses on culture as explanation and salve to remedy negative experiences of BME students, Masocha (2015, p. 641) uses Critical Race Theory to foreground race and racism, which are 'salient determining factors in the experiences of Black students within social work education'. However, Masocha concurs with other authors that a lack of inclusive teaching and adjustment to diversity has led to difficulties for BME students in accessing aspects of the curriculum. Typically, in the literature reviewed, structural issues and racism are acknowledged but then bracketed. Culture is drawn upon as a foundational concept to both explain and solve existing difficulties. The next part of the review examines how literature draws upon this concept of culture to address difficulties in learning and accessing the curriculum.

Pedagogical solutions

The fourth concept concerns how solutions to some of the (perceived or actual) difficulties facing BME students are arrived at. Tedam (2012) for example, invokes the idea of cultural difference to explain how African students struggle to understand aspects of the social work curriculum and the need for Afrocentric approaches to demystify and make accessible western academic literature and philosophy. The article reports on a case study describing individual teaching with one Zimbabwean student, where culturally relevant examples were used to aid understanding of Social Learning theory. A thoughtful, reflexive account of this method is presented with an acknowledgement of the risks of being patronising or over-simplifying theory. Nevertheless, there is an assumption that cultural difference is the barrier to understanding. She proposes a model of individual tutoring using an analogy that, she claims, is successful because it is culturally familiar to the student. However, there may be alternative explanations for the successful outcome: Tedam describes five hours of individual tutoring with the student, and it is likely that most students who had this amount of individual tuition on a theory would come away feeling more confident in their understanding.

Tedam (2012) offers a direct approach to internationalising the social work curriculum and addressing its eurocentricity. An analysis of eurocentricity and its impact is also taken up by Bernard and colleagues (2014) who outline how Eurocentric curricula contribute to marginalization. They describe how eurocentric values and traditions reinforced a sense of difference among BME students, who felt that their life experiences and cultural capital were overlooked. In their analysis, curriculum content is not associated with individuals' problems in learning or adapting but incrementally contributes to feelings of marginalisation. This is a

variant on the 'solutions' approach and alludes to the need for an institutional response to marginalisation, rather than a focus on BME students' deficits. The authors identified how minority students positioned themselves as 'agentic learners' (p1943) drawing on resilience in order to survive their experience of higher education. Responsibility for adaptation and change here is placed with educators, who need to develop more nuanced understandings of students.

The requirement for educators to adopt a reflexive approach is taken up by Hillen & Levy (2015). The starting point of their argument is the statistical finding that a higher percentage of BME students fail or take longer to complete programmes in Scotland. They argue students and social workers need to reflect on their experiences and positionality, and educators need to reflect on how teaching practices construct race, whiteness and oppression. There is an assertion that changes in attitudes and approach are needed with a strength-based frame for social work education that values diversity. However, there is a concurrent deficit approach: the resilience and determination of BME students is highlighted but gender issues are said to be due to women's 'own experience of female subordination and oppression within patriarchal societies' (792).

Most literature fails to critically examine dominant ideas shaping social work education and therefore does not get to the heart of its problematic nature, while a reflexive analysis of culture is often missing. Culture, in the literature reviewed, is associated with difference, need and identity. This provides an explanation of the problems for BME students and consequently leads to proposals for changes in teaching styles or curriculum content. A more reflexive stance would require an interrogation of the discourses which dominate and limit the practice of social work education. For example, the cultures of social work and social work education are not addressed directly and yet discussions are taking place in those contexts. Social work programmes adapt teaching methods to accommodate BME students' difference, while the parameters that keep the 'liberal white subject' central are unchanged and maintained (Jeffery, 2005, p. 411). Methods, interpretations of problems and technical solutions to difference are offered that can be incorporated into the existing orthodoxy of social work education. The recurring motif of culture both explains problems and is used to address problems. However, 'problems' are defined by the institution and educators not by BME students themselves.

Discussion

The literature reviewed provides clear evidence of educators attempting to positively respond and adapt to changes in contemporary social work education within the confining strictures of the academy where institutional responses to BME students frequently fail to address the complexity of every day pedagogical challenges. Nevertheless, a major criticism of the literature is its lack of reflexivity on two broad counts: firstly, regarding the institutional contexts in which knowledge is being generated; secondly the forms of knowledge about racism being developed and the solutions being presented. By reflexivity we do not mean an 'empty' process which demonstrates researchers' credibility or introspection. Instead, 'epistemic reflexivity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) is a process of identifying how one's interpretations are located within a discourse. This seems imperative when considering BME students' experiences. There is a need to give attention to researchers 'and students' connections to the societal and institutional contexts of race in analyses.

We would argue that approaches to knowledge and data in the literature are largely unreflexive, with key concepts and terms undefined in most of the literature. There is an overwhelming focus on BME students' experiences, accessed through interviews and focus groups with BME students. While these methodologies suggest the influence of black feminist and intersectional epistemologies in some of the studies, elsewhere an uncritical paradigm of customer consultation seems more influential. BME students' voices are crucial to include in research on this topic but they do not provide insights into all relevant aspects of it, because some institutional processes are invisible to students themselves. Data from interviews and focus groups are also analysed in limited ways, generally focusing on the content of what students say, rather than discursive analyses of how race and difference come to be discussed. Tedam (2014b) is distinctive in using a narrative approach in her study of Black African students' experiences of practice placements but, even here, the focus is on the content of participants' stories, not how racism is spoken about. There is very little attention in the literature to how social work educators speak about race and diversity (one exception is Fletcher et al., 2015). Data are frequently also presented out of their original context: examples of racist instances are left to speak for themselves in much of the literature and there is an over-reliance on anecdotal fragments rather than evidence that enables greater clarity about how race operates systematically. Exceptions to this are Hussein (2008) and Liu (2017), two quantitative studies which provide clear evidence of sustained differences in progression and completion for certain groups of BME students, but these studies raise many questions about the reasons for such differences, which only the Goldsmiths study has begun to explore.

The studies in the review utilized narrow methodological frameworks and there was a lack of epistemological positioning. This may be because much research relating to social work programmes takes place within an evaluation frame, meaning there are fewer opportunities for critical debate when research relates to race and social work programmes. In terms of institutional context, scant attention has been paid to the role of contemporary universities or the actions of university-based social work educators in producing racial inequalities. The literature presents findings about racist activity by local authority staff involved in placement finding, practice educators and service users but there is nothing equivalent about social work lecturers (for example Bartoli, 2011, the only paper examining academic assessment, focuses on students' performance but not how assessors themselves make judgements). Instead, there is an emphasis on how programmes can be delivered in ways that meet the needs of BME students more effectively. This constructs BME students' needs primarily in terms of their minority status and experiences of marginalisation in programmes, so the requirement is to address isolation by having closed BME student groups (see e.g. Masocha, 2015) and BME mentors (Bartoli et al, 2008). Concepts of racism as a failure to address cultural difference predominate here, so the solution is to broaden the syllabus or find more representative resources. These steps are not reliable ways to address the racism that most research identifies. Only the Goldsmiths study considers the problem of universities increasingly viewing BME and international students as relatively untapped markets.

Limitations of the review

The publications that met the inclusion criteria relate to studies carried out in Scotland and England but not Wales or Northern Ireland, so the discussion does not address the particular issues to do with ethnicity, language and legislation in those nations. It only reviews writing about the topic since 2008, and so does not identify concepts that were current in earlier literature, for instance discussions about the significance of anti-racist practice for black social work students during the 1990s (for a review of these discussions, see Penketh, 2000). An overarching limitation of conceptual reviews is that they subject original literature to critique based on conceptual frames developed by the author. The concepts we identified as significant were the product of a process of subjective interpretation; they are not neutral but informed by our own standpoints. The review has raised epistemological and theoretical questions which this body of literature did not set out to directly address. Consequently, the critique is not of the substantive findings or evident theoretical perspectives found in the papers but of the assumptions, knowledge and concepts of racism implicit within them.

Concluding remarks

This article has reviewed a small body of literature about BME students on social work programmes and identified the influence of four problematic concepts of racism. Our analysis suggests there is a need for future research in this area to engage with current debates about racism in the social sciences and research about minority social work students taking place internationally. Recent studies in Britain have limited themselves to particular questions relating to what students say about their experiences, leaving other matters unexplored. A more open account of visible and invisible processes in students' experiences is required as well as critical engagement with the Academy's role in structural processes which perpetuate inequalities.

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