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# **Racism, Anti-Racist Practice and Social Work: Articulating the Teaching and Learning Experiences of Black Social Workers**

## ***Introduction***

In the mid 1990s, a Black practice teacher<sup>1</sup> programme was established in Manchester and Merseyside in the UK, with the primary aim, to increase the number of Black practice teachers in social work organisations<sup>2</sup>, and in turn provide a supportive and encouraging learning environment for Black student social workers whilst on placement (Stokes and Wainwright 1996).

Through explaining this programme, and the findings from the Black practice teachers' and students' subsequent teaching and learning, the paper will critically look at the current state of the notion of anti-racism and Black perspectives in social work practice (Bonnet 2000, Graham 2007, Singh 2001, 2004). It will question whether it has any contemporary relevance in social work agencies, that are increasingly being driven by managerialist and

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<sup>1</sup> A Black practice teacher is someone of African/Caribbean and/or Asian heritage that teaches social work students how to practice social work on placement.

<sup>2</sup> A social work organisation is a local government , private or voluntary funded agency, that employs social workers to work with vulnerable children, families and adults in need.

performance<sup>3</sup> agendas (Brewster 1992, Corby 2006, Dominelli and Hoogvelt 1996). Importantly, the lessons gained, will inform the direction and possibilities open to anti-racist practice and Black perspectives in the future.

## ***The Study***

In the North West of England, research has been undertaken (commencing in 2002 and ongoing), to establish the quality of the practice teaching<sup>4</sup> and student learning, that is taking place almost a decade later with Black workers and students (Wainwright 2003). This paper, is an exploration of the ideas generated within the placement process, that particularly focused on the discourse of racism and anti-racist practice. Ten students and ten practice teachers, of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) heritage<sup>5</sup> explain their understanding of racism, and anti-racist practice within social

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<sup>3</sup> Managerialist and performance agendas are terms used to describe the growing influence of managers, and the measurement of performance, through targets and outcomes in social work organisations. It is widely suggested that this management led influence has undermined the professional identity and autonomy of social workers.

<sup>4</sup> Practice Teaching – now entitled practice assessing -is the activity undertaken by experienced social work practitioners, to enable teaching and learning to take place, for social work students on placement with them.

<sup>5</sup> The term 'Black' is used as an umbrella term for the political identification and experience of people with African/Caribbean and/or Asian heritage. It is meant as an inclusive term, for anyone who self identifies as such, who has experienced racism. At times, the term will be used inter-changeably with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) to be as inclusive as possible, and to reflect the ever-changing experience and identities of Asian and African/Caribbean peoples.

work (Singh 2004, Wainwright 2003). Twelve of the respondents were women, five of these were practice teachers and seven were students; and eight were men, consisting of five practice teachers and three students. To reach the respondents, a snowballing<sup>6</sup> sample technique was used (Atkinson and Flint 2003), primarily from two sources, social work organisation databases and my own personal contacts. It is a qualitative study, using the methods of semi structured interviews (Miles and Huberman 1984), and documentary<sup>7</sup> evidence (Silverman 2004). The semi-structured interviews involved individually interviewing each respondent, using an audio-tape to record their answers. The strength of semi-structured interviews, *'is the opportunity it provides to collect and rigorously examine narrative accounts of social worlds'* (Miller and Glassner 2004:137).

Whilst the documents, through portfolios that practice teachers generated, provided another method with which to analyse data, and gain an understanding of how anti-racist practice teaching and learning was taking place (Prior 2000).

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<sup>6</sup> Snowballing is a sample technique used when it is difficult to generate a sample, or the population group are difficult to reach. It is based on the notion of personal contacts, knowing one person that fits the criteria of interview, who knows some-one else and so on.

<sup>7</sup> The documentary evidence used was the portfolios that practice teachers had compiled to demonstrate their competence to teach social work students on a placement.

As the researcher in this process, it is important that I acknowledge my own position as a Black (of dual African /Caribbean and British heritage) male, with an interest and commitment to developing ideas concerning anti-racist practice. Thus, part of my interest and motivation was to encourage an ongoing dialogue, concerning the development of social work practice, through the prism of ethnicity and anti-racism (Singh 2004, Wainwright 2003). However, I acknowledge that as a consequence of my own ethnicity and interest, I will have been perceived by respondents to have particular views on anti-racism.

Whilst being a Black (BME) male may provide partial 'insider' knowledge (Sibeon 1980), this term is such a generic description of ethnicity, that any understanding I may have of a potential participant's experience will be very limited. This becomes even more evident when multiple identities are considered, for instance, concerning gender, sexuality, disability, class, religion and age (Anthias 1998, Hall 1996). It is because of these multiple identities, which change temporally and spatially, that I may be considered by respondents of various ethnicities, to be simultaneously an 'insider' and an 'outsider' (Hall 1996, hooks

2000, Sibeon 1980). An 'insider' because of the commonality of experience of racism, yet, an 'outsider' because of the myriad of identities that the respondents had that were not the same as my own (Merton 1973). Being an 'insider' may have provided the opportunity for respondents to achieve a mutual trust and understanding concerning Black perspectives and anti-racism.

In contrast, being an 'outsider' may have been particularly significant when talking to the female respondents, who may have experienced the research through a prism, that refracted gender as a central signifier of difference, either of more importance, or inter-connected with 'race' and ethnicity (hooks 1991, Hill-Collins 2005). Thus, my identity may have provided the potential for reticence for some participants in feeling able to talk openly with me. Alternatively, my presence as a Black male may have encouraged the respondents to 'racialise' their answers to questions (Gunaratnam 2003). In other words, to appear more 'Black' or radical in their responses, than perhaps they would in other circumstances. I attempted to address this by emphasising the voluntary nature of participation. In addition, it was stressed that the questions asked in the enquiry were aimed at eliciting knowledge based on *their* experiences, there were no right or

wrong answers, and it was my experience of BME social work practice teachers and students, that they were keen for the opportunity to 'tell their story'. However, whatever my subjective positionality, in relation to my Black presence, it was important to be reflexive when considering issues of commonality or difference (Gunaratnam 2003). As a Black researcher,

*'Although commonality can be seen as a form of empathic identification, it is vital that such empathy is interrogated and grounded in the recognition of the researcher as a separate and interactionally powerful producer, listener and interpreter.'*  
(Gunaratnam 2003:102)

Whilst all the respondents in the research, and myself as the researcher, were of BME heritage, it is important to note that some of the Black practice teachers and students, undertook a social work placement with white practice teachers and/or students, i.e. a Black practice teacher may have had a white student on placement, or a Black student may have been placed with a white practice teacher. However, the focus of the interviews, and of this paper, are the reflections of BME practitioners (students and practice teachers) in relation to anti-racist practice. Particularly, I

was interested to understand how BME students' and practice teachers' experience of 'race', ethnicity and racism had informed their teaching and learning of anti-racist practice.

## **Contextualising Anti-Racism - a Political and Social Movement**

Anti-racism became prominent as a social and political movement in the UK from the 1970s onwards, as organised responses to racism, in its many forms, began to emerge from BME communities. In particular, the strike at Grunwick that witnessed Asian women challenging discriminatory practices in their workplace, provided one critical example of a fight back against racism (Ramdin 2007). Likewise, the BME community worked with the Anti-Nazi league, to challenge the far right and fight racism on the streets (Penketh 2000). However, it is the response from Black youths on the streets of the UK that crystallised the anger and resentment that the BME communities felt towards the state and forced anti-racism to be adopted by the local state<sup>8</sup> (Ben Tovim et al 1986, Saggar 1992).

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<sup>8</sup> In 1980, 1981 and 1985, riots took place in UK's major cities, where Black youths fought with the police, as a response to the discrimination they experienced in housing, education, policing and social welfare.



As a consequence of the BME communities resistance to racism, anti-racist policies and practice were adopted in local government, particularly in education and social work (Rooney 1987, Tomlinson 2008). The objective of these policies, was to challenge institutional and individual racist practices, and demonstrate an understanding of the UK as a multicultural society (DES 1985). Some commentators argue, that from their inception, there was a disconnection between the aspirations of BME communities, and actions of the local state, in following these policies (Sivanandan 1991, Gilroy 1992). Yet, local government managed to engage some individuals within BME communities, by providing employment opportunities, particularly in race relations posts. However, once the anti-racist movement had been engaged by the local state, the fundamental problem with anti-racism, was trying to understand exactly what it meant, and who it was trying to represent (Sivanandan 1982, Gilroy 1992). The criticism then, as is still apparent now, was if people can't articulate the anti-racist message, let alone devise a coherent set of policies or practices to implement, how can it have any positive effect on Black peoples' lives (Gilroy 1992)?

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Some argue, that the problem with anti-racism is that it is trying to address an inherently problematic notion, the idea of 'race' (Goldberg 1993, Spencer 2006). It is widely acknowledged, that whilst the concept of 'race' used in everyday language, it has no real meaning, as there are no 'races', just social constructs of groups of people (Gilroy 1994). It is a 'treacherous double bind', that we are obliged to use –as there is no better term- but it is inadequate for the purpose of describing different ethnicities (Radhakrishnan 1996:81, Gunaratnam 2003 ). Therefore, race' is a contested term,

*'Race is conceptualised as an unstable and decentred complex set of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle.'* (Omi and Winnant: 1986:68)

Just as 'race' is a term that is contentious, many argue, that there is not just one, but many racisms, and that these change over temporal and spatial zones and are determined by political, economic, and social conditions (Rattansi 1994, Weirvorka 1995). It is this problematic relationship between the idea of 'races' and racism, that makes anti-racism difficult to explain, or put into

practice. Hence, the challenge for anti-racism, is how discrimination because of 'race' and racism, can be tackled, when they are such complex, contested and perennially changing oppressions (Cross and Keith 1993, Goldberg 1992).

In responding to these criticisms, it is argued, that anti-racism is best explained as a project emerging from the BME communities in the 1970s and 80s (Sivanandan 1982). Others, also suggest that it is a broad ranging term that articulates activities including anti-immigration/ deportation campaigns, anti-fascism movements and multi-culturalism<sup>9</sup> (Ben Tovim 1986, Bonnett 2000).

Importantly, it will be argued below, that the rise of anti-racism and the development of anti-racist practice, informed the evolution of the notion of Black perspectives, and the influence of BME workers in social work (Stubbs 1985, Stokes 1996).

### ***Fertile Ground: The Radical Tradition in Social Work***

The anti-racist movement originated from the BME community, however, the tradition of radical values in social work in the UK

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<sup>9</sup> Multiculturalism is a contested concept in the UK (for instance see Hall 2000, Modood 2007 and Spencer 2006). However, it is generally accepted as a term that describes the positive inclusion of diverse cultures and ethnicities in society.

needs to be understood, as an important context to the profession engaging in anti-racist practice. The influence of a more radical strand of values – though present in the early days of nineteenth century social work – have only become prominent in social work since the 1970's . The development of radical social work, placed an emphasis in locating social work values with the struggles of the exploited and particularly the working class (Bailey and Brake 1980, Corrigan and Leonard 1981). Radical social work was an important development in the evolution of social work values, because it tried to develop a method of working with service users<sup>10</sup> within a framework of understanding the reasons for disadvantage in society (Moreau 1979, Rojek et al 1988). This idea(l) was critiqued through the emergence of feminist social work practice (Brook and Davies 1985, Hamner and Statham 1988). Feminists argued, that in society, and specifically in social work, the position of women was unique, because of sexism that permeated society (Dominelli and McCleod 1989). Further, that social work values should not only focus on a Marxist analysis of the working class, as this still colluded with patriarchy, but on the structural oppression of women (Dominelli 2002, Langan 1992, Healy 2005). This period in social work, witnessed a mainstream

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'service user' is now recognised as most appropriate to describe individuals and families who receive a social work service.

acknowledgement that an individual service user's experience, needed to be understood in a wider structural analysis, which included class and/or gender, as key determinants in the life chances of people (Jones 1983, Mullally 1993).

In other words, the emergence of these two radical strands of social work values and practice ensured that the 'social' was kept within the 'work' (Fook 2002, Langan 2002). A 'social' perspective, argued that an individual's particular difficulties or circumstances, could not be disassociated from the bigger social picture. The values of social work, central to the profession as they are, could not be disentangled from a wider notion of social justice (Clifford and Burke 2005). Bringing about change not only for individuals, but for groups of people, be they women and/or those in poverty. Thus, radical social work values provided fertile ground for the profession to try to grapple with the complexities of 'race' and anti-racism.

## **Black workers and the Rise of Anti-Racism in Social Work**

### **Practice**

A Black presence (through the employment of BME social workers) in social work has only been evident since the early 1980s. Prior to this period, social work practice tended to adopt a 'colour blind' approach, focusing on the generic nature of human need (Cheetham et al 1987, Rooney 1987). This was particularly evident, in what was to become the battle ground on which much of anti-racism was fought. The area of adoption – or more specifically trans-racial adoption – whereby, Black children were adopted by white couples (Gaber and Aldridge 1994, Gill and Jackson 1983), symbolised the approach of ignoring the structural discrimination that BME people faced in everyday life because of racism (Sivanandan 1982).

However, social work's failure to address the issues of racism within its practice, was abruptly challenged, because of the riots in the 1980s. Here, predominantly Black youths challenged the British state, particularly the Conservative government and police powers (Hall 1980, Solomos et al 1983). Black communities in Bristol, Liverpool, London and Leeds – by their very actions –

articulated that the British state was racist to its core, and every area of social and economic policy was oppressive, and excluded African/Caribbean and Asian people from participation. The areas of most resentment for the Black community, were mass unemployment, racist policing, inadequate housing and third rate education and social welfare services (Gifford 1989 et al, Gilroy 1987, Hall 1980, Sivanandan 1991). Thus, along with other areas of social welfare provision, some – but certainly not all – social service providers began to re-evaluate their ideas, policies and practices concerning 'race' (Husband 1991, John 1991, Williams 1999). This evaluation was broadly addressing two areas, social work practice with BME individuals and communities, and the recruitment of social workers that began to reflect the Black communities that services were supposed to be delivered (Cheetham et al 1987, Rooney 1987). Whilst the two areas are clearly linked, the provision of services to BME communities, and recruitment and training of Black staff, this paper will focus primarily on the latter.

Initial attempts to engage with BME communities, were met with scepticism and understandable reticence by Black people (Cheetham et al 1987). This is because social service

departments (SSDs) had a track record of disproportionately providing statutory services for BME service users, whether in mental health (Francis 1991), or children services (Ahmad 1990, Jones 1993) i.e the controlling/restriction of liberties services. Where attempts had been initially made, often senior social work managers, through SSDs, imposed their own view, on the kind of Black worker that was needed to work within social work. These workers tended to be Black and/or Asian, and middle class, and therefore, the antithesis to the notion of achieving a workforce that represented, and could meaningfully engage with their local BME communities (Rooney 1987, Sivananadan 1991).

However, these initial mistakes were slowly rectified by recruiting BME staff that had a connection with the communities they were intended to work within (Husband 1991).

By the beginning of the 1990s, a Black social work presence had been established, particularly in the metropolitan SSDs. This Black presence, became a catalyst for change in social work education (Singh 1992, Stokes 1996). A key point in this change, was the introduction of a Black perspectives committee, in the then education and training regulation body for social work, the Central



Council for Education in Social Work (CCETSW 1993). This committee became the focal point for articulating that the Black experience in society, and indeed social work, needed to be recognised as a central concern for social work education and training (CCETSW 1991a, Stokes 1996). Another initiative that arose through the influence of BME social workers, was development of the CCETSW Northern Anti-Racist Curriculum Development Project (1991b). The ideas for this project evolved as a consequence of Black social workers attending a conference in Lancaster, to listen to contributions from committed Black anti-racist speakers. The key message from this conference, was that BME social workers had a responsibility, a duty, to challenge the system, practices and individuals within social work that perpetuated racism (John 1991). To do nothing, was to collude, and to become a detached irrelevance from the BME communities BME workers were employed to work within (Rooney 1987, Sivanandan 1991).

This initiative augmented the position of anti-racist practice, within the education and training of social work students (CCETSW 1991a). It also emphasised the strategic influence of the CCETSW Black perspectives committee, in developing ideas to

both combat racism (CCETSW 1991b, 1993, BPQSW 1991), and introduce a paradigm, a world view, that articulated BME communities' experience in the face of daily racism (Singh 1992).

Black perspectives in social work were seen as essential for Black – and indeed white – workers to work within a multi-ethnic society (Ahmad 1990, Cheetham et al 1987, Ely and Denny 1987). It was also an opportunity within social work, to construct knowledge that was in the interests of Black people. To achieve this, any notion of Black perspectives, had to be underpinned by an understanding of the political and historical struggle of BME communities in Britain (Singh 1992, 1996, 2001, Sivanandan 1982). Importantly, it was an opportunity to articulate the wider, more complex, and often more positive nature of the BME communities' and individual's experience. Black perspectives, were an opportunity for committed Black activists, intellectuals and professionals (including social workers), to develop a paradigm that challenged racism in society, whilst also expressing that the Black experience was much more than resistance to oppression (Graham 2007, Sivanandan 1991, Stokes 1996).

Critically, for social work, Black perspectives provided an opportunity to articulate the experience of BME service users that received a social work service. Too often, BME services users were (are) over-represented in everything that was statutory and controlling in social services – (Chand 2000, Francis 1991). Black social workers were able to provide alternative social work frameworks – that focused on liberatory models of practice, in partnership with BME community social welfare organisations (Humphries 1993, Waul et al 1994).

However, the entry of BME workers into social work has been a tale of attrition. For whilst there has been progress at times in Metropolitan authorities, the experience of students and newly qualified BME social workers has been invariably tainted, through institutional and individual racism (BPQSW 1991, Bryan 2000, Penketh 2000, Stokes 1996). Thus, whilst Black perspectives provided opportunities for BME service users and workers, they also highlighted many of the negative experiences that Black staff experienced (Burgess et al 1992).

One strategy for BME workers to maintain a presence in SSDs was to establish Black Workers' groups (BWGs) (Rooney 1987,

Bryan 2000). BWGs provided a medium for BME workers to discuss and develop their understanding of Black perspectives, for social work practice, and as Black people themselves. These forums also provided a mechanism for individual and collective support, along with the opportunity to negotiate and challenge the decisions of senior managers, within their respective social work organisations (Wainwright 2003).

The experiences of BME workers in SSDs and other social work organisations, were similar to those of Black students (de Gale 1991). However, evidence suggested that because of BME students' vulnerability, as a consequence of the imbalance of power in the assessment relationship, on placement and in universities, their experiences were often worse (Humphries 1993, Brummer 1988, Burgess et al 1992). BME students had the opportunity to express their frustration, at being isolated and undervalued, at a number of CCETSW sponsored conferences in the early 1990s, including the seminal gathering at Lancaster (Burgess et al 1992, de Gale 1991, Penketh 2000).

Therefore, three core initiatives converged to create the momentum for the development of a Black practice teachers'

project. Firstly, BME workers had begun to organise through BWGs, and express frustration at the racism in the provision of social care, for service users and in the workplace. Secondly, CCETSW collaborated with Black academics and professionals to make the unequivocal statement that racism was 'endemic' in British society (CCETSW 1991a, 1993). Thirdly, the context of CCETSW's initiative, along with BWGs or individuals being present in SSDs, and other social work organisations, provided the climate for BME students to have a voice, and express concern at the Eurocentric models of academic assessment and social work practice (BPQSW 1991, Burgess et al 1992). The notion of a Black practice teachers' workshop in two Metropolitan authorities, provided the opportunity to address the negative experiences of BME students and the frustrations of BME workers.

### ***Black Practice Teachers***

It is suggested here, that Black practice teachers provide an added dimension of experience and commitment to anti-racist practice learning. Furthermore, it is generally thought that Black practice teachers have a great deal to contribute to social work education and training, in that they can bring different and additional

perspectives to this forum (Humphries et al 1993). Equally, they can provide positive role models for Black and white students, and thus destroy some of the negative 'ethnic' stereotypes that exist. Black practice teachers can also bring experience and skills to aid a student's understanding in a multi-ethnic community (de Souza 1991). The presence of Black practice teachers can be seen as validating Black experiences. The theoretical and political difficulty with calling on Black practice teachers, is that agencies often see them as 'experts' in addressing racism in an agency simply because they are Black. Being identified as an expert concerning racism is also an experience that Black students have to endure (Aymer and Bryan 1996, Burgess et al 1992, Humphries et al 1993). However, it is contended here, that Black practice teachers/workers can provide a useful perspective or insight into racism, but that this should not necessarily be equated with expertise. The danger is that such an approach can marginalize the role of white practice teachers, in relation to teaching anti-racist approaches. As Humphries (1993) notes :-

*' . . it could be advantageous for a Black student to have a Black practice teacher, in that he/she will be in tune with the student's perception of their 'Blackness' and their experience of racism. .*

*.although we largely agree with this analysis . . white practice teachers should equally be responsible for adequately training Black students, the same way Black practice teachers have a responsibility to train white students.’ (Humphries et al 1993:64)*

### ***The Black Practice Teachers’ Project***

As part of the role the author had throughout the implementation of this Black practice teachers’ project, that of a practice learning coordinator in a social work agency (that is, the person responsible for training, developing, coordinating and supporting practice teaching and learning within an agency), one of the key strategies adopted to achieve improving anti-racist practice learning outcomes was to co- develop two Black practice teaching (CCETSW) programmes. It is, therefore, important to the interpretation of the empirical research, to gain an understanding of the development of the Black practice teachers’ programmes, as a key initiative then, to achieve anti-racist learning outcomes.

In both courses, not only were the practice teacher trainees Black,

but, so also were the trainers and the practice supervisors<sup>11</sup>. Both courses, though different in structure, adopted similar aims and achieved similar outcomes (Stokes and Wainwright 1996).

Both projects clearly demonstrated that many Black workers were keen to become practice teachers, but that many obstacles existed within agencies and other systems, which prevented them from achieving this objective (Macpherson 1999, Stokes 1996).

The projects provided ways of overcoming some of those obstacles. In order to achieve the aims and objectives of the projects, it was important to move away from conventional methods of recruiting practice teachers within agencies and practice teachers' programmes. By having a group of Black social workers only, it was possible to provide a programme that was tailored to their needs, and enabled there to be particular focus on issues of 'race' and racism in social work. The programmes were enriched by the experiences of the Black social workers who undertook them, and at the same time, they enabled these practitioners to use their experience to develop as practice teachers (Burke and Wainwright 1996). Hence, the programmes provided a platform for Black workers to become established as

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<sup>11</sup> A practice supervisor is a person who assesses a practice teacher, including marking their portfolio to establish whether they have reached the designated standard of being an accredited practice teacher.



practice teachers in their agencies. This research explores the narratives of Black workers who have entered practice teaching, partly as a consequence of the pioneering projects that took place some ten years prior.

***Previous Research: Black social workers, Practice teachers and students***

Before discussing some of the findings of this research, it is important to acknowledge other studies that has addressed the experience of Black workers, practice teachers and students.

There is a small amount of research undertaken concerning Black social workers and anti-racism. Bryan (2000) has examined the experiences of BME workers and students through a biographical lens, to explore why there are often negative findings (Aymer and Bryan 1996). Her study suggested that there were positive experiences, often where Black workers had worked together to support their studies or daily professional lives. However, many BME students and workers experienced racism, particularly concerning negative perceptions regarding their perceived limited 'intellectual' ability. She argued that to fulfil BME students' and workers' ambitions, it was important to challenge these racist

stereotypes and myths, and to enable learning and progression from the emotional, psychosocial and intellectual position of the individual (Bryan 2000). Other studies, identify similar themes, those of Black workers not being valued, experiencing racism from service users and colleagues (Brockmen et al 2001), and being denied the opportunity for promotion (Johns 2005, Stubbs 1985).

Importantly, these findings are also evident in the studies of Black practice teachers, where there appeared a lack of management support, and institutional barriers blocking BME workers becoming practice teachers (Stokes 1996). Singh's recent comprehensive research (2001, 2004, 2006) augments the findings concerning BME social workers and students. He argues that Black practice teachers are still undervalued, and that there has been a dislocation between the anti-racist movement from BME communities and the more sanitised version in social work organisations. However, the findings from these studies suggest that there needs to be new ways of working with BME 'communities of resistance', centred on religious and ethnic identification (Singh 2004:278). Black/white binarism<sup>12</sup>, whilst

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<sup>12</sup> This term refers to polarising debates concerning ethnic identity to people being either Black or White. The notion of binarism critiques this simplistic analysis, suggesting that ethnicity refers to a much more heterogeneous identity and experience.

important, is seen as too restrictive of an anti-racist debate that is becoming increasingly international. Importantly, the studies concur with Bryan's findings, and articulate the strength of Black feminism's analysis, of multi-dimensional understandings of power and oppression to frame future anti-racist practice (Hill Collins 2005, Singh 2004).

### **Black Practice Teachers, Students and Anti-racism – The findings**

There is some resonance of the themes that emerged in previous studies regarding BME social workers, practice teachers and students. When discussing the centrality of BME workers' ethnicity, it was apparent that the identity of the practice teachers and students influenced the quality of the learning experience in the placement setting. Black respondents argued, that those practice teachers and students who were Black, added an extra dimension to anti-racist learning and practice. For Black practice teachers particularly, there was a willingness to link their experience of racism, to an understanding of anti-racism/anti-racist practice. This view is supported through work undertaken with Black practice teachers, that states a 'lived' experience for the

understanding of racism is beneficial to social work and students (BPQSW 1991, Brummer 1988, de Souza 1991).

However, whilst personal biography influenced people's understanding and explanation of racism and anti-racism, it did not necessarily make the definition any clearer or indeed fuller. In other words, Black respondents, although clearly committed to understanding and explaining racism, had no greater theoretical insight than white practitioners. Another important issue in this area, which was evident from the responses of both Black practice teachers and students, is that of the blurring of professional and personal boundaries in understanding racism. Black workers can find themselves caught up in trying to be 'experts', as Black people and 'insiders' claiming inherent knowledge solely through a sense of 'being' (Aymer and Bryan 1996). Through accepting a tag of innately being the 'expert', Black teachers and students are placed under unnecessary pressure in the arena of racial equality, whilst enabling some white colleagues to renege on their own legal and procedural responsibilities when addressing anti-racism (Penketh 2000).

The first of these quotations provides an example of how a Black

practice teacher's knowledge and experience *can* enhance the learning a student gains. The second from a student, demonstrates some of the inherent pitfalls in Black people being endowed with, or undertaking an 'expert' role. This comment is from a Black male, with a white female student, not working within the Black community,

*'Considering the area and the lack of Black people, the student interviewed (users of) a residential home which she would have to deal with on her placement, and asking about the provision for Black people. What anti- racist practice was going on in those homes? In asking those questions, there was a development of an understanding of the issues brought to the fore . . . and (this) enabled the student not to make assumptions, and to find out herself what the views were, and to see for herself the way racism in an institution works. At the other end of the scale, to look at a Black mental health day centre that tries to meet the needs of Black people with mental health problems. . .two ends of racism, one was anti-racist practice, the other was what was going on for the people of this city.'*

This respondent provides concrete examples of anti-racist practice

in a placement that evidently had been thoughtfully planned. The quality of this answer also supports the argument put forward, that the development of a Black practice teacher programme to provide a pool of Black practice teachers can add an extra texture, depth and level of personal understanding to the anti-racist learning opportunities available to students (Stokes and Wainwright 1996, Singh 1996). The experience of the practice teacher provided a personal and positive learning outcome for the student.

In contrast, however this comment is from a student who is a Black woman, placed with a Black female practice teacher, in a youth offending team in the Black community.

*'The service users group was largely Black, male, and working class. It's taken for granted that you would understand. It was not formal. The team discussed it. They talked a lot about young Black men coming up against the criminal justice system, and how they were discriminated against. Because both of us were Black, there were assumptions that both of us understood the dynamics of it because of the service user group.'*

Underpinning this dissatisfaction, was an unwritten assumption,

that because two Black women were working together, there would naturally be a theoretical and practical understanding, of how to implement anti-racist practice, based on the view, that they would have experiential wisdom as Black people to explain anti-racism (Hill-Collins 2000). It was also assumed that a similar social and political identity (Black), would naturally enhance the learning experience for the student. While it has been argued that this can contribute to a positive learning experience (Stokes and Wainwright 1996), it is clearly not the only ingredient necessary, to enable flexible and effective learning outcomes to take place between the practice teacher and student (Brah 1996). Here, there is evidence that commonality of a Black experience, between the practice teacher and student is not a given. Many other elements of their multi-dimensional identities, including ethnicity, class, sexuality and age, will inform how they can engage in the teaching and learning process with each other (Anthias 1998, Lewis 1996).

However, the Black student's response also emphasised the importance of a Black perspective, or Black experience, when practising anti-racism (BPQSW 1991, Graham 2007, Singh 1996). The quotation is representative because eight out of ten Black

students emphasised this point, as they believed that their experience or perspective assisted them in providing an anti-racist service (Burgess et al 1992, Penketh 2000). This also supports the analysis put forward here, that personal experience – provided by Black practice teachers - whilst not providing a greater theoretical knowledge of racism, does provide a platform with which to develop effective anti-racist learning outcomes (Brummer 1988, Channer and Stokes 1996, Singh 2001).

It is interesting, that four social work students who believed their practice teacher had not added to their understanding, were Black with white practice teachers. Furthermore, four Black students who believed they had learnt from their practice teacher concerning this matter, were placed with Black practice teachers. The reason cited for this, was that it was only as Black students/practice teachers that they gained more experience and 'expertise' concerning racism and anti-racist practice.

This finding highlights the value that Black students and practice teachers generally place on their experience, to inform their strategies, to develop anti-racist outcomes (Burgess et al 1992, Stokes 1996). The findings also support the suggestion, that too



often social work is informed by 'practice wisdoms' (Carew 1979, Thompson 2005), in contrast to knowledge informed by theoretical rigour, or empirical evidence. There is also no distinction, between the invaluable experience that Black students and practice teachers can bring to anti-racist practice, and expertise. It is the author's view, that anti-racist expertise is developed through an accumulation of experience and knowledge, and it is not something that is inherent within Black people.

Practice teachers also recognised within their accreditation portfolios, that their personal experience was central to their value base (Burke and Wainwright 1996). For Black practice teachers this was often both an emotive and political issue. This was written in a portfolio by an Asian practice teacher,

*'Having been on the receiving end of continual and incessant racist abuse between the ages of eight and eighteen, mainly at school, but also in my residential neighbourhood in the Midlands, I have a sense of urgency that this injustice is not allowed to predominate.'*

Later on he writes,

*‘Throughout the placement I drew on my own personal experience of racism and the experience, knowledge and skills I have acquired in the racial equality field over the past eight years.’*

This sort of strong commitment, linked to their own experience of the brutality of racism was evident in all of the Black practice teachers’ portfolios (Brummer 1988). This comment, also magnifies the importance of developing an understanding of racism over a long period of time. Thus, many Black practice teachers, have developed over years, a sense of the ‘injustice’ of racism and strategies to deal with it. This realisation, implicitly highlights the extreme limitation an eighty (first year), or one hundred and twenty (second year), day placement can provide in teaching anti-racism. If practice teachers are stating they have developed an understanding over a long period of time, this would mean that the gains made in teaching social work students in the duration of a placement, would be modest in comparison.

Therefore, it is clear that there is evidence of the development of anti-racist discourses, as a result of the presence of BME workers and practice teachers in practice settings, and many positive opportunities emerge as a result of this. However, there are two

dangers inherent in over-reliance on the experience of Black practice teachers and students to provide 'expertise' in matters of racism and anti-racism. The first, is the resulting under-use of theoretical perspectives, and research knowledge to underpin such work. The second, is that by over-reliance on this form of 'expertise', there will always be the potential hazard of other staff not taking on their own professional responsibility to work effectively in an anti-racist way (Wainwright 2003).

### ***Towards a continuum of ethnicity***

There was also an emerging trend by some respondents, and particularly by students, to recognise the emergence of self representation and diversity within the umbrella term of Black (Modood 1994, Singh 2004, 2007). This first response is from a student explaining an understanding of racism, within the context of ethnicity.

*'Racism - people of ethnic minorities discriminated against because of their culture, colour and the opportunities denied them in education and work . . . mostly institutional sometimes individual.'*

This response highlights a trend from most of the BME students and practice teachers. It reflects an appreciation that BME communities are increasingly diverse, for instance, through the myriad of cultures that have entered the UK, including refugees, and that their own experience of racism may be different from others (Cross and Keith 1993). In other words, although racism is theoretically complex, there is an understanding that there is not only one racism, there are several racisms, constantly reshaping and re-forming. These racisms are contingent on macro – political, economic, and micro – psycho-social processes. As ethnicity is always in a process of flux, the conditions for racism will be necessarily different depending on time and space. Thus, conceptualising the racism individuals and BME communities experience, involves understanding the fluid ever-changing nature of ethnicity, that is in '*contextual transformation and dislocation*' (Rattansi 1994:59). In other words, individual ethnic identities are not fixed with immovable boundaries, but evolve and this is influenced, amongst other contingencies, by racism. This may be evidenced in current social work, through the experiences of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (Kholi 2007). Who negotiate their identity through their experience of racisms in various forms in the UK and elsewhere (Kholi and Mather 2003).

Another clear example of ethnicity and its fluidity is provided by a Black practice teacher in a youth offending team setting,

*'The experience of working with Black people has been interesting. I found a lot of teaching has been tokenistic. I think things are put down as cultural conflict, when they could be stages of development as adolescence. I think the understanding of culture, and the way it's taught on social work courses, doesn't provide any one answer. Culture has become where they fight back, or where they resist. Culture is quite fluid. I haven't got the same culture as my parents, because I was born in this country. A lot of young Black people, there's things they want to go with, and things they don't. Too mechanistic an interpretation of culture, means sometimes they're quite reactionary. Sometimes, in the guise of culture, social work lets some quite reactionary situations go. You have to make decisions and be more problematic about it.*

*To what extent does a fifteen year old Asian lad, from a fundamentalist background remanded to accommodation, what weight do you give his feelings, not to want to go into a mosque, as opposed to his family's feelings that he should do. You have to*

*acknowledge that's a problem, and depending on who you've read, then come down on one side or the other. But, I think it's better to see it as just problematic, and I don't think its dealt with problematically.'*

This quotation points to the depth of critical debate and understanding that some BME practice teachers have concerning anti-racist practice. Racism is not seen here as a simple matter, but one that is both complex and problematic. It implies a critique of social work, current anti-racist practice and structured competency-based thinking. The respondent also makes reference to culture as being 'constant' and 'problematic', pointing to a fluid, ever-changing, continuum of ethnicity that should be taken into account by social workers when they are engaged in anti-racist practice (Modood 1997, Modood and Werbner 1997). It is significant that the respondent considers identity to be the most important issue that needs to be understood and acted upon in this case. The practice teacher is stating that being anti-racist is fine, but to be effective, there must be an application of critical thinking within anti-racist practice that allows issues of culture, religion, and identity to be viewed in a problematic and challenging way (Singh 2004). For this respondent, only when ethnicity is viewed in a fluid

way, can anti-racism move from being a rigid form of practice, to one that is reflexive, and has a real impact on Black people's lives (Gilroy 1992, Modood and Werbner 1997, Rattansi 1994).

On a similar theme, the emergence of antipathy towards Muslims – particularly of Asian descent is noted by a Black student.

*'We talked about the changing communities coming into the city. There are lots more Muslims wanting a service, Somali and Asian. But I think that the racism we need to tackle now is the one that lumps all Asians and Muslims together as extremists. There's a kind of persecution going on . . .'*

This comment reflects the fusion between religion, culture and racism, that particularly, the Asian community are experiencing. It is insightful, because (post September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 yet pre-July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005), the issue of anti-Muslim hatred, is raised as a significant arena of racism that is being experienced by the Asian/ Arabic communities (Modood 2005). The comment is made by a Somali student placed with a Black practice teacher. It also builds on the idea, that anti-racist practice needs to be reflexive, that is in dialogue with structural and ever-changing experiences of BME

communities (Hall 1992, Jeffrey 2005). Hence, an understanding of culture and its effects on racist stereotypes, need to be grappled with by committed anti-racist practitioners. This is particularly important, in the struggle against racism for BME communities with significant Asian communities. Here, communities are engaged in a perennial struggle to express their culture, religion (often but not exclusively Islam) and identity. This struggle is not only against the Far Right, as in the recent experience of BME communities in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley (Burnett 2004). But, also against a prevailing hegemony, that perceives these BME communities as a terrorist threat, religious extremists, an alien culture and as the 'enemy within' (Fekete 2004:17).

Thus, for some practice teachers and students, an appreciation of a richness of diversity, and the problematic of culture within this was evident. This connects with their experience of practice, either on placement or in social work settings, which has indicated that dealing with the structural issue of racism, is but one facet of anti-racism. Challenges may arise for social work practitioners, when Black people within their own families and communities, have diametrically opposed views of culture, religion and ethnicity. These issues of conflict, based on diversity and the fluidity of



culture, may manifest themselves within the family. That is, in the case of differing parental and children's values, the placement of Looked After children in residential or foster settings; or young people becoming involved in offending, and finding themselves within the criminal justice system (Frazer and Selwyn 2005). Opposing views may also be played out within the myriad of cultures, values and religions, within what is known under the umbrella term 'Black community' (Brah 2000, Modood 2005, Sivanandan 2002). Or, indeed it may manifest itself within the growing challenge of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (Kholi 2007, Kholi and Mather 2003). Whatever the arena of conflict, or contested ground, this evident continuum, or fluidity of ethnicity, provides the context within which anti-racist social work is practiced today, and - as is evident from these responses - some practice teachers and students were getting to grips with what this means for their social work interventions.

### ***The Black Community and Anti-Racism***

The majority of practice teachers that worked near the Black community made reference to anti-racism being political, or in some way a struggle. For instance, they recognised the need to

organise, and that approaches need to be systematic.

This response was from a Black practice teacher working near a Black community.

*‘Anti-racism is the active participation and struggle by all people, Black and white, to change and to stop the oppression that is racism, in all its shapes and forms.....to present another way of doing things, which doesn’t involve discrimination on the basis of colour . . .’*

It was felt that the quality of learning was enhanced by placements provided within close proximity to the BME community, and those with child care as the specialist area of practice. Interestingly, this respondent also emphasises the importance of a political and professional struggle by Black and white people against racism. Here, the argument that committed anti-racist white practitioners have a key contribution to make with Black workers against racism is supported by this practice teacher (Bonnett 2000, Singh 2004). These findings are congruent with the author’s expectations, because they represent accurately, the focus on, for instance, the over -representation of Black children and young people in the

youth justice system (Goldson et al 1999), on the 'same race' adoption debate (Gilroy 1994, Doh 1998, Kirton 2000), and latterly on the notion of improving outcomes for Black children, a matter that currently dominates child care social work discourse. A Black male student in a youth offending team stated,

*'I don't remember it being enacted too much as a formal tool. . . we spoke about it in supervision and stuff. I think it sort of permeates it. I think if you get too concerned with it, you look at everything as a bureaucrat rather than as a social worker. You can't when you do day to day work. . . I think about fifty per cent of the young people I worked with were Black on my caseload.'*

Where there was regular contact, the issue of racism was frequently discussed, in team meetings and as a daily occurrence, so that discourse concerning racism was both familiar and thought-through. This was particularly the case when examining the impact the police, or the criminal justice system per se, had on young BME people (Bowling and Phillips 2002). This respondent also highlights the importance anti-racism not being an 'add on', but permeating the culture and philosophy of the way a social work office works. Thus, anti-racist practice is augmented by a Black

presence, of professional social workers and service users, however, it is critical that policies, procedures and protocols underpin any commitment to practices of racial equality (Wainwright 2003).

Therefore, the evidence suggests that whilst BME practice teachers and students gained from their experience, reflections and observations of racism – working with BME service users – in different settings also added an extra- dimension or opportunity to learn. Likewise, by training and enabling BME practice teachers to work with Black (and white) students, opportunities to discuss and reflect on BME perspectives and anti-racist practice were enhanced (Singh 2001, 2004, 2007).

## **Changing times**

However, whilst some interesting observations were made by BME practice teachers and students about racism and culture, there was also evidence of changing times, within the discourse and experience of ethnicity, culture and racism. It is important, therefore, to try to build on the some of the ideas generated by these BME practice teachers and students, to examine the current

state of anti-racism.

### ***Anti-Racism***

Firstly, it is important to re-establish where anti-racism came from, before examining what role, if any, it has now in tackling racism in society in general, and social work in particular. The struggle for anti-racism, came from the struggle of BME individuals and communities, since they have settled in this country (Gilroy 1987, Ramdin 1986, Sivanandan 1982, 2006). It is the struggle of individuals and communities on a daily basis, to have to fight racism whatever, their circumstances, ethnicity, culture or location (Wainwright 2003). This may mean resisting racism that threatens BME communities, as has been witnessed in Burnley and Blackburn with the rise of the BNP (Sivanandan 2005), or being isolated and threatened by racists and having to fight to try and survive (Singh 2004), or being the victims of a horrific violent racist attack, as in the recent shocking murders of Zahid Mubarek and Anthony Walker. Likewise, as noted by some respondents in this paper, the struggle may mean challenging a cultural and racist hegemony, that demonizes religions which are different to Christianity. Particularly, the anti-Muslim racism, that Asian

communities have had to endure in a post September 11<sup>th</sup> (2001) and July 7<sup>th</sup> (2005) Britain (Fekete 2004).

Second, anti-racism also needs to appreciate the ever changing terrain that it needs to work on. The ever-changing ethnicities that are seeking to enter this country, in an attempt (ironically) to improve their lives, or to escape trauma, persecution through torture, and threat of death (Lewis and Neal 2005). In other words, anti-racism needs to respond to the new front line of racism, the very different experiences of new migrants (Sivanandan 2002, 2005) and asylum seekers (Bloch and Schuster 2005). This places new challenges for anti-racists for as Sivanandan (2002) pertinently reminds us, when discussing the established Black and Minority Ethnic professional and middle classes, '*they are us 40 years back. We are them now*'. In other words, new migrants' struggles today, are similar to those of (our) BME professionals' parents in 1960s and 1970s. Those escaping from brutality and economic impoverishment in their own country – often from Africa and Asia – in the hope of a better life in this country, are often not prepared for the many shades of racism that they will experience here (Rattansi 1994). Yet, it is incumbent on anti-racists to embrace this new challenge, through the tackling the hostility that

new migrants experience (Lewis 2005).

Third, anti-racist practice should build on the reflexivity identified here, by the Black social work practitioners (both practice teachers and students) (Fook 2002, Jeffery 2005). For anti-racism to be relevant, and have any real meaning and effect, there needs to be a symbiotic relationship between theory and practice reality. In other words, anti-racism must always be re-framing the concepts and idea(l)s that inform the practices, that take place in social work specifically, and in wider society (Rattansi 1994, Singh 2004, Williams 1999). Yet, these ideas (or the grander notion of theories), must be grounded in BME, and indeed, new migrant individual's and communities' experiences. As respondents have identified here, without one, BME experiences, the other, a development of coherent ideas about the nature of racism, it will inevitably render itself to criticism, that the anti-racist practice talked about, is either disconnected with front line or grass routes experiences, and/or theoretically flawed and one dimensional (Wainwright 2003).

Fourthly, there is something about the *anti-* in anti-racism, that inevitably puts committed social work practitioners and activists in

a defensive position. It is the very essence of a negative expression. This of course is partially inevitable, because of the virulent nature of the oppression that anti-racists are up against – racism (Wagner 2005). Yet, to challenge racism, to be located within BME community experiences, to be reflexive and real, anti-racism/anti-racist practice, must look forward to a more positive affirmation, in the perennial challenge of fighting this oppression. Here, the reframing of Black perspectives can play a key role.

### ***Black Perspectives***

What does this mean for notions of Black perspectives, and BME practice teachers and workers challenging racism? It is reasonable to state that the old certainties, the old binaries of Black and white are too simplistic to grapple with this ever changing picture (Hall 2000, Lewis and Neal 2005, Rattansi 1994). Whilst the political concept of Black as outlined above still will have resonance for many BME individuals who are second or third generation migrants (Brah 2000), for those new migrants, for asylum seekers, for those fleeing religious and political persecution, Black may not be a totem to rally around. Thus, there needs to be some reflection on the new identity, that the ever-



changing ethnicities and cultures coming to this country can embrace (Hall 2000, Modood 2007). This identity – built on the foundation of Black perspectives – needs to forge an alliance and include the established BME individuals and communities. As although the ever-changing nature of ethnicities and cultures questions the notion of Black as a politically representative term; the one perennial commonality that they, we, all have as New and Old Migrants (Modood 2007, Sivanandan 2002), is the daily experience of the pernicious multiple forms of racism. It is not for this paper to produce the term, but it may be as straightforward as Black, Migrant and Minority Ethnic communities.

## ***Conclusion***

Finally, what does this mean for the challenge of social work and anti-racist practice? It is suggested here, that BME social work practitioners (as practice teacher and students), will be pivotal to the development to a new reflexive relationship between Black, migrant and anti-racism. As the respondents have stated, their experience of racism will inform ideas and strategies to tackle it.

Yet, although social work is currently in a state of denial, in terms

of its main purpose, and there is fixation on performance, managerialism and cost effectiveness (Corby 2006, Dalrymple and Burke 2006). Social work's main challenges continue to be those of working with individuals, families and communities. For BME communities, the key challenges have not suddenly evaporated. The misuse of statutory and controlling interventions for children and adult services, as the cases of Climbie and David 'Rocky' Bennett bear witness. Yet, there are many new challenges emerging; asylum seekers and in particular unaccompanied children, New Migrants, and the ever increasing alienation and marginalisation of large sections of long established BME communities. It is evident that the Race Relations Amendment Act, has up to now, failed to change the patterns of discrimination these groups face. Nor, will the occasional performance indicator, that mentions 'ethnicity' be a panacea to the racism that these Black communities experience. What will make a difference, will be Black workers (as individuals and groups), like those identified here, working with committed anti-racists, perennially re-shaping and reforming anti-racist practice in collaboration with Black, Migrant and Minority Ethnic communities.

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