



# PSDP - Resources for Managers of Practice Supervisors: Addressing barriers to the progression of black and minority ethnic social workers to senior leadership roles

## Introduction

This knowledge briefing focuses on how managers of practice supervisors can proactively support the progression of black and minority ethnic social workers into management positions and senior leadership roles. A central aim of the briefing is to explore some of the barriers to the advancement of black and minority ethnic social workers to leadership and senior management roles. The intent of this briefing is threefold.

Firstly, it will provide a brief summary of the research messages about the career advancement of black and minority ethnic social workers. Secondly, it will reveal how structural factors that play out within organisations affect the progression of black and minority ethnic social workers. Finally, it considers how managers can identify and remove organisational barriers that block the progression of black and minority ethnic social workers.

Throughout, the briefing will use reflective exercises to help managers develop the capacity to engage with the issues that need addressing in order to advance black and minority ethnic social workers to senior-level roles.

It's important to stress here that there is a general dearth of research that takes into consideration the issues affecting black and ethnic minority social workers' progression into leadership roles in the profession.

## Setting the scene: the career progression of black and minority ethnic social workers

Despite significant numbers of black and minority ethnic social workers in frontline practice, they are disproportionately under-represented in managerial and senior-level positions in social services departments, and tend to be concentrated in the lower positions (Audit Commission, Balloch et al., 1995; Butt & Davey, 1997; Haworth et al., 2018; Williams, 1995). According to some, ongoing racism is at the root of black and minority ethnic social workers' underrepresentation to senior and middle management level positions (Balloch et al., 1995; Brockmann et al., 2000; Butt & Davey, 1997; Kline, 2015).

Some commentators point to the ways in which institutional racism continue to play a key role in black and minority ethnic social workers' experiences in the organisation, which means they are often overlooked for development opportunities (Brockmann et al. 2001; Kline 2012; Love 2019). Data obtained from a Freedom of Information request by the Adult Principal Social Work Network shows that white males are overrepresented at senior leadership level in social care organisations (2017). That is, white males overwhelmingly make up the majority of management roles in social work, resulting in a lack of racial diversity in senior management roles in social services departments (Harlow 2002; Haworth et al. 2018; Turner 2017). In terms of career progression, evidence points to continual barriers for black and minority ethnic groups to progress to middle and senior management roles in social work organisations (Adult PSW Network, 2017).

### Key messages

- > There is an underrepresentation of social workers from black and minority ethnic backgrounds in social work leadership roles.
- > There is a lack of racial diversity in leadership teams in social services departments.
- > Workplace racism is described as a barrier for black and minority ethnic workers reaching senior levels.

## Barriers to progression faced by black and minority ethnic social workers

There are a host of concerns about barriers to progression into senior leadership and management roles in social services departments for black and minority ethnic social workers (Brockmann et al., 2001).

Progression to leadership levels can be a challenge, not least because of a lack of career development opportunities and support for black and minority ethnic workers (Kline, 2015). There is also evidence to show that the numbers of black women at senior management levels are low and that black women seldom achieve managerial positions as a result of intersecting systemic racism and sexism (SSI, 1991). Brockmann et al.'s (2001) study looking at how racism is experienced by black and minority ethnic staff in social services departments emphasises the complex and subtle dynamics of institutional racism, which leave the power structures at an organisational level intact to negatively impact the advancement to senior leadership roles of black and minority ethnic women. This challenge may be compounded even further by gender discrimination (SSI, 1991).

In one of the few studies that have systematically explored the perspectives of black women social workers, participants described how organisational barriers thwart their aspirations to managerial positions (Lewis, 1996). In particular, they highlighted that they have significant barriers to navigate to achieve senior positions and that the organisational

climate was an influential factor in their confidence (Op. cit). They contend that a major barrier lies in deficit-informed presumptions made by managers who undervalue the skills and attributes that they bring, and often have low expectations of them so some were reluctant to put themselves forward for promotion to managerial positions as they felt they were often overlooked and essentially encountered a glass ceiling (Ibid).

An intersectional approach provides an important lens through which to understand how gender and race dynamics impact black and minority ethnic women, who experience multiple forms of inequality. Essentially, intersectionality fosters an understanding of the different ways in which race, gender, age, sexuality, ability, and class intersect to shape everyday experiences. Or, simply put, intersectional approaches help to uncover the interactive dynamics that can shape black and minority ethnic social workers' experiences in the workplace.

Indeed, as Brockmann et al. (2001) highlight, workplace racism is a real barrier to career progression for black and minority ethnic staff, and the promotion of black and minority staff into middle and senior management positions is critical for reducing racism. Thus, it is suggested that a lack of black and minority ethnic representation in senior positions can prevent ethnic minority employees from progressing within the organisation

(Brockmann et al., 2001; Kline, 2015; Ross, 2019).

### **Key messages:**

Certain factors can be barriers to black and minority ethnic workers' efforts to advance their careers including:

> Organisational obstacles to overcome to climb the promotion ladder.

> With few social workers from black and minority ethnic backgrounds at senior level, there is a lack of role models to learn from.

> Discriminatory practices.

## Reflective questions

As noted in the previous section, research suggests that widespread race discrimination in the workplace may be an embedded feature of recruitment and progression processes in organisations (Brockmann et al., 2001; Kline, 2014; The Kings Fund, 2019). Given this, it is worth pausing here to reflect on the following questions:

- > How do you gather and monitor data about recruitment and progression in relation to race?
- > How are black and minority ethnic workers supported for upward progression in your organisations?
- > How confident are you to facilitate difficult conversations about race?
- > What, if any, specific training on race and career progression have managers undertaken?
- > Is the advice and guidance around criteria for recruitment, appraisal and promotion clear and accessible to all staff?

## How can managers identify and remove organisational barriers to the progression of black and minority ethnic social workers?

As noted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD):

‘Organisations need to understand where the barriers to progression for different groups lie, and use this information to level the playing field and enable talented people to reach their potential at work’.

(2017)

As this quote highlights, it is therefore all the more important for managers to examine the distinct ways that their organisations might reproduce racial inequalities, and think about their strategies for training and development. As such, decision-makers may need to conduct an exercise in organisational reflexivity to unpick the nuances of the experiences of black and minority ethnic workers. Simply put, organisational policies, practices and culture and, in particular, managerial structures that are predominantly white and male, make it difficult for black and minority ethnic workers to progress to leadership positions.

It seems that most organisations will have equality statements proclaiming a commitment to inclusion, equity, and the creation of a diverse workforce. Nonetheless, such factors can only be

judged by how proactive you are in genuine engagement to tangibly address the issues that will deliver positive outcomes for your black and minority ethnic social workers.

Attention needs to be paid to how subtle barriers and unconscious bias may hold back black and minority ethnic workers. In particular, it is important for managers to be aware of and acknowledge the ways in which implicit racial bias may affect how judgements about suitability are made. Taking all these factors into consideration will make senior leaders better placed to understand how racism may be embedded within their processes and procedures (PM Editorial, 2020). Understanding how these factors impact the lived experiences of black and minority ethnic social workers is therefore crucial for the genuine engagement required to begin to break down these barriers.

In terms of workforce development and training, it is critical that decision-makers develop processes and structures that are conducive to the personal development of black and minority ethnic staff (Brockmann et al., 2001; Kline, 2015; Love, 2019). Facilitating access to leadership development opportunities and networks will be key in supporting workers in their career planning. For example, coaching and mentoring are excellent ways to motivate individuals if you are looking to develop the capacity for leadership and management (Ross-Sheriff & Orme, 2017). To be sure, black and minority ethnic social workers will need to have self-belief, confidence,

drive and agility to succeed. However, most importantly, they will also need managers who are not only willing but have the ability to recognise and cultivate their talent. Increasing the racial diversity in middle management and senior-level positions means strengthening the support black and minority ethnic social workers need for career progression. Creating racially diverse leadership teams means mentoring promising black and minority ethnic staff and this requires effective anti-racist policies and practices that are rooted in an understanding of how race and racism form barriers to progression.

### Reflective questions:

Take some time to consider these questions:

- > Do black and minority ethnic staff within your organisation have equal access to progression opportunities?
- > How are you investing in the development of your black and minority ethnic staff for roles in your senior leadership teams?
- > What can managers do to improve outcomes for black and minority ethnic social workers?
- > What are you doing to identify and remove barriers to access and progression for black and ethnic minority social workers?
- > What kinds of strategies do you have in place to nurture talent and maximise the potential of black and minority ethnic social workers?



## Laying the groundwork

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a resource that can assist managers in supporting the development of black and minority ethnic social workers for leadership roles. In simple terms, managers need to understand the many obstacles that these employees face in their career paths to managerial and senior leadership positions. Improving access to leadership roles takes commitment, investment and clear pathways (Harworth et al., 2018). To make the necessary changes, managers must first acknowledge the existing inequalities and be committed to addressing the issues raised. Therefore, explicitly recognising racism and committing to anti-racist action is key to addressing the lack of racial diversity in your leadership structures.

It is increasingly clear that managers have an important role in helping to develop the culture of the organisation for addressing the obstacles that black and minority ethnic social workers face. Given this, the challenge for managers will be how they confront uncomfortable and deeply ingrained practices in recruitment and promotion processes.

## Thinking ahead

These key questions will help managers make visible the barriers black and minority ethnic social workers face:

- > What change processes do you need in place to improve racial diversity in your leadership teams?
- > What kinds of strategies and interventions are most likely to work in your organisation?
- > How might institutional and personal values, biases, prejudices and assumptions about different ethnic groups impact their career paths in your organisation?
- > In situations where social workers have different backgrounds to your own, how do you support them and allow them to grow?

## References

[Adults PSW Network \(2017\) \*Who is Leading the Way? An introductory report on the world of social work leadership.\*](#)

Audit Commission / Social Services Inspectorate (1999). *Making Connections - Learning the lessons from joint reviews, 1998/9*. Audit Commission Publications.

Balloch, S., Andrew, T., Ginn, J., McLean, J., Pahl, J., and Williams, J. (eds) (1995). *Working in the Social Services*. National Institute for Social Work.

Brockmann, M., Butt, J., and Fisher, M. (2001). The Experience of Racism: Black Staff in Social Services. *Research Policy and Planning*, 19, 2.

Butt, J. and Davey, B. (1997) 'The experiences of Black staff in the social care workforce', in May, M., Brunsdon, E. and Craig, G. (eds) *Social Policy Review* 9. Social Policy Association.

[Chynoweth, C. \(2015\). \*The public sector faces terrifying challenges. People Management.\*](#)

[Chowdhury, A. \(2016\) \*I can't say I'm shocked that 96% of public sector leaders are white. The Guardian.\*](#)

CIPD (2017). *Addressing the Barriers to BAME Employee Career Progression to the Top*. CIPD.

Davey, B. (2002) Management Progression and Ambition: Women and Men in Social Work. *Research Policy and Planning*, 20, 2.

[Golding, N. \(2020\). \*Exclusive: Fate of BAME candidates depends on 'gatekeepers', says study. Local Government Chronicle.\*](#)

Haworth, S., Miller, R. and Schaub, J. (2018) *Leadership in Social Work: (and can it learn from clinical healthcare?)*. University of Birmingham

[Love, S. \(2019\) \*My plan to improve Westminster's shameful record on staff diversity. Local Government Chronicle.\*](#)

[Kline, R. \(2015\) \*Beyond the Snowy White Peaks of the NHS?. Race Equality Foundation.\*](#)

[P M Editorial \(2020\) \*What's it like being black in HR? \(part two\). People Management.\*](#)

Ross-Sheriff, F. & Orme, J. (2017) Mentoring and Coaching. *The Encyclopaedia of Social Work*. National Association of Social Work & Oxford University Press.

Ross, S. (2019) *Life in the shadow of the snowy white peaks: race inequalities in the NHS workforce*. The King's Fund.

Social Services Inspectorate (1991) *Women in the Social Services: A Neglected Resource*. HMSO

Social Services Inspectorate (1997) *Women in Social Services: Maximising the Potential of the Workforce*. Department of Health.

Various (2019) 'A long way to go': ethnic minority NHS staff share their stories. The King's Fund.

Williams, J. (1995) Black staff in social services. In Balloch, S., Andrew, T., Ginn, J., McLean, J., Pahl, J. and Williams, J. (Eds) *Working in the Social Services*. National Institute for Social Work.



**We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.**

---

Supervising the Supervisor  
Practice Supervisor Development Programme  
The Granary Dartington Hall  
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE

tel 01803 867692  
email [ask@researchinpractice.org.uk](mailto:ask@researchinpractice.org.uk)  
 [#researchIP](https://twitter.com/researchIP) #PSDP

[www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk](http://www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk)

**Author:** Professor Claudia Bernard  
Goldsmiths  
University of London

Research in Practice is a programme of  
The Dartington Hall Trust which is a company  
limited by guarantee and a registered charity.  
Company No. 1485560 Charity No. 279756  
VAT No. 402196875

Registered Office:  
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall,  
Totnes TQ9 6EL