When racism, poverty, power and prestige collide in social work education and practice: a case study of a working class, Mixed-race female student studying at a prestigious White university in South Africa and employed in England as a social worker

Carlene Cornish

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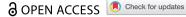
Carlene Cornish

School of Social Work, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

ABSTRACT

The words, '*Sorry, you're not Black enough*' painfully alerted me to the domineering presence of institutional racism at the University of Cape Town (UCT), a prestigious university which customarily reserved access for White, affluent and international students. Positioned at the intersections of race, gender and social class, this study draws on Critical Race Theory's counter-storytelling, using autoethnographic research to critically reflect on my childhood, Social Work studies and career in South Africa and England. The paper reveals painful experiences of microaggressions and overt racism in social work practice, but also celebratory moments of good practice, academic success and individual resilience.

The eye never forgets what the heart has seen.

-Bantu Proverb

Introduction

From a very young age during my primary school years, I became acutely aware of the harsh and inescapable presence of racial discrimination altering the lives of Mixed-race and Black communities residing in South Africa. Racial segregation was enforced under the Apartheid regime, an institutionalised political system of legislation that upheld segregationist policies well before the documented 1948 to the early 1990s. Therefore, dictating segregation of race regarding access to public amenities, social gatherings, housing, education and employment opportunities. Stereotypes, like 'all Mixed-race children from poverty-stricken communities have no aspirations and join gangs', 'are violent and carry knives', 'do alcohol and drugs' are commonly expressed cultural stereotypes, which have terrifying power over our actual performance. Certainly, these false beliefs are hard to ignore when growing up as a child on the Cape Flats, especially

CONTACT Carlene Cornish ✉ C.Cornish@uea.ac.uk School of Social Work, University of East Anglia, Norwich Research Park, Room 1.06, Elizabeth Fry Building, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK

when there were plenty real-life examples resembling these typecasts. Yet, defying stereotypical beliefs, I achieved a place on the BSocSc Social Work degree at the University of Cape Town (UCT), a prestigious university which customarily reserved access for White, affluent and international students. Access to UCT was tough: it was geographically distanced, regulated by high academic requirements, expensive tuition fees and the full-force of the quota system that was imposed under the Apartheid regime, was used to restrict academic intake of local, ethnic minority students.

In this journal article, I highlight stories of my own personal experience of racial oppression and the painful ways how harsh, racist political conditions shaped precarious prospects for most people growing up in the Cape Flats region. Recollections of these racialised experiences raised a previously asked question, 'How do we create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization?' (Hooks, 2003, p. 15). Developing a deep understanding about how social structures work to dominate one's life has significance, but it is not enough. According to Hooks (2003) alternative habits of being and resistance from that marginal space of difference, held transformative power. In *Interpretive Ethnography*, Denzin (1997) calls for the transformation of ethnographic writing, arguing that scholars should create new sorts of experiential texts, such as narratives of the self, found in autoethnographies to unveil truths. Autoethnographic writing legitimizes the personal experiences and perspectives of those who have been excluded from the dominant discourse (Rodriguez, 2006). Writing counter-stories seeks to expose and subvert the dominant discourse, thus challenging the status quo (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). For the marginalized, narratives can serve as a powerful site of resistance whereby storytelling unmasks and challenge majoritarian stories that uphold racial privilege (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), these counter-stories serve several theoretical and methodological purposes. Firstly, counter-stories can construct a sense of community amongst those marginalised by providing a space to share their sense of reality and experiences; it builds a common culture of shared understandings. Furthermore, counter-storytelling challenges the accepted ideology, the dominant perspective. Which has significance, because by sharing my counter-story, it creates a platform challenging the dominant view that has always painted Mixed-race communities on the Cape Flats area as dangerous, gangsters and criminals. And yet, the people navigating these spaces are much more than that. In using counter-storytelling, this article illustrates the sheer determination of individuals, utter challenge and problematic ways in which racism occasioned socio-economic deprivation and a lack of social and cultural capital obstructing enhanced life chances for most Mixed-race people on the Cape Flats. By writing these counter-stories, it includes narratives that also inspire hope and present a positive account of individual resilience, academic success and good practice in social work. As Delgado and Stefancic (2001) argues, storytelling that focuses on the marginalized can empower both the storyteller and those who listen.

Recounting experiences of institutional racism in higher education, this article subsequently draws on my professional social work experiences in South Africa and England, identifying microaggressions in social work education, practice and private life as a mother of two fair-skinned daughters. In defining micaroaggression, Solorzano

et al. (2000) identified it as the restrained insults (verbal, non-verbal or visual) directed at people of colour, often routinely or unconsciously. Disappointedly, this issue of micro-aggressions is often overlooked in research, shown in only five studies on microaggression (Otuyelu et al. (2016), Kia et al. (2016), Caragata and Liegghio (2013),Baden (2016), and Wong and Jones (2018). Specifically, little attention was paid to microaggression among social work professionals, students and education settings (Wong & Jones, 2018); it is an under-investigated research area. However, through counter-storytelling, as a researcher I can use my voice and increase attention to the lived experiences of racism as a social worker of colour.

This study draws on Critical Race Theory (CRT) as it sharpens focus on racial identities and hierarchical structures governing knowledge, ideologies, political systems and socio-economic institutions maintaining White dominance (Modiri, 2012). In using CRT's notion of counter-storytelling, this study employs autoethnography to disrupt the unfair ideological assumptions and negative portrayals of local, Mixed-race children growing up in working class, deprived communities. Agreed, CRT is mostly associated with legal studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), but lately its methodology is growing in popularity in educational studies and experiences where race, class, and ethnicity intersect within a social context (Lynn & Dixson, 2013). Despite the opportunities that CRT provides for exposing racial oppression, it has been criticised for favouring 'race' over social class and consequently obscuring how capitalism perpetuate class struggle and inequality (Darder, 2011). However, CRT draws on Crenshaw's (2011) theory of Intersectionality as an analytical tool, which recognises the interconnected nature of race, class and gender and how any individual or group may experience overlapping systems of discrimination at the intersections at which power relations meet (Ahmed, 2012).

In this article, I firstly provide a brief focus on the racial categorisations of South Africans to position this focus on the Mixed-race social group. Thereafter, I provide a description of autoethnography and critical race theory as frameworks employed in this article. Following this, I use autoethnographic vignettes and subsequently draw on various academic literature for a critical analysis of my personal and professional experiences. Lastly, I argue for the use of storytelling, to develop in-depth knowledge of the racialised experiences of marginalised groups.

The South African Mixed-race community

The Population Registration Act, 1950 (and subsequent amendments) legitimised Apartheid, a political system of racial categorisation whereby South Africans were classified and registered according to their racial characteristics: 'Coloured' (Mixed), Black and White South Africans. Indians, of South Asian descent, were later added as a separate category. At the time, this racial categorisation was deemed as largely 'com-mon-sensical' and consensual, constructed on broadly agreed factors along descent, language or culture, and appearance (Seeking, 2008). However, there was controversy because racial classification was not based on either descent or purely biological markers, but instead, the cultural markers of 'appearance' and 'general acceptance' were most important (Seeking, 2008). Questions were raised over whether or not people met the legal criteria to be registered as White or 'Coloured', particularly as 'the distinction

between "Coloured" and White people was particularly blurred with fair-skinned affluent "Coloured" people' (Green et al., 2007, p. 394). Therefore, hardly surprising, many disputed cases were reported to the South African Parliament. Many individuals disputed and appealed to be reclassified into other categories or were forcefully reclassified (Ratele, 2009). Only in this section, will I use the term 'Coloured' to refer to Mixed-race communities in South Africa. In using this term, this terminology will accurately reflect the language used in South African legislation, journal publications written by local scholars, and everyday speech used in local communities and newspapers. On terminology, here it is furthermore important to highlight that the label 'native' was replaced by the labels 'Bantu' and Black and from the 1970s onwards, the Black category was further sub-divided into ethnic or linguistic groups, such as Zulu and Xhosa (Christopher, 2002).

Racial mixture, especially sexual relations, was forbidden by the enforcement of The Immorality Act 1927, 1950, 1957. 'Coloureds' faced negative racial typecasting centred around the idea that racial mixture is pejorative and results in degeneration and weakness (Adhikari, 2004). 'Coloureds' felt marginalised and locked in their intermediary position in the racial hierarchy. South African scholars such as Adhikari (2004) discovered that feelings of marginalisation were commonly expressed when 'Coloured' people lamented, 'first we were not White enough and now we are not Black enough'. This statement resonates with my own life experiences and memories of how Apartheid profoundly impacted the lives of my family and local communities. For instance, I vividly recall the sadness and my Dad's profound longings for life in Cape Town's District Six, the place where he was deeply connected to his sense of self, family relations and community events. However, his life was turned upside down when in February 1966, the Apartheid government enforced the Group Areas Act of 1950 and declared Cape Town's District Six as a Whites-only' area. Over 60,000 of its residents, predominantly 'Coloured people', were forcibly removed; consequently, displacing a previously tight-knit community for the bleak, adverse and precarious life on the Cape Flats.

The 'Coloured' racial identity runs deep, through shared experiences of racism and histories that inform how 'Coloureds' self-identify. 'Coloured' communities adopted strong Western culture and values, in opposition to African counterparts. Thus, statements such as 'Coloured' people must accept that they are also Black, voiced by the African National Congress's Gwede Mantashe (Eyewitness News, 21 August 2015), has sparked fury and resulted in 'Coloureds' such as Eusebius McKaiser, a political activist and social theorist, to criticise 'outsiders' for imposing political identities on a social group, who has agency and are capable of deciding for themselves how to self-identify when considering complex moral and political issues that are implicated in the history of 'Coloured' people (Mail and Guardian, 3 December 2015). I agree with this viewpoint that 'Coloured' people should use their voice and agency to assert their political positioning in South Africa. Post-apartheid and across the globe, the unilateral term Black has been constructed as more politically correct when referring to 'Coloured' communities too. By implication current political discourse has constructed a dangerous assumption that 'non-Whites' were a homogeneous group given their experiences of racial discrimination in South Africa. Such dominant portrayal of a sense of uniformity, skewed perception and overlooked the distinctly different, yet painful living experiences of 'Coloured', Black and Indian communities during the Apartheid regime. Then, there is also the glaringly obvious reality that those who self-identify as 'Coloured' in South

Africa, are currently in political milieu that still prescribes how they ought to think, speak and make sense of their racial identities and experiences. Consequently, alienating and deafening the voices of those who self-identify as 'Coloured'. Hence, in a profound way, giving greater significance to the publication of this article so that the voices of all marginalised communities are expressed.

Research methodology

From the outset, it is important to acknowledge that my research methodology was specifically chosen to create a space that allows for the unconcealed and unapologetic use of emotion expressing the voice of my painful, racialised experiences. The decision to use autoethnography and CRT counter-storytelling ordinarily presented a unique opportunity to problematize and reveal the dominance of class inequalities and racial structures permeating social institutions, illustrating its effects on marginalised communities. However, my research approach deviates from the more traditional, scientific and abstract research that is characteristically valued for its objectivity and invisibility of the researcher. Earlier, scholars such as bell Hooks (2003) called for the creation of new forms of knowledge and oppositional worldviews, whereby the marginalised can challenge the legitimacy of political and cultural dominance within education settings and other social institutions responsible for reproducing inequality. What is needed is a disruption of knowledge, interposing the restrictive pattern which tends to exclude the researcher's identity and voice in academic texts (Chávez, 2012). In consequence, I am positioned at the margins of an academic sphere and it is from this marginal position inside dominant social structures, that I intend to recreate those instances when my existence as a Mixed-race female, from a working-class background collided with predominantly White, affluent and powerful spaces. In writing counter-stories, it is an attempt to reclaim representational space and use it to communicate unique, subjective and compelling stories of experiences that contribute to our understanding of the social world we occupy.

Autoethnography

Moreover, I chose autoethnography as it aligns with my cultural heritage and recognises the significance of oral tradition in the retelling of microaggressions (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018) as a mechanism for examining broader structural factors. Autoethnography can be defined as the union of 'autobiography, story of one's own life, with ethnography, the study of a particular social group' (Reed-Danahay, 2009, p. 6). According to Ellis (2004, p. 38) autoethnography is an 'autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness through the autoethnographer's gaze', focussing outward on 'social and cultural aspects of their personal experiences' whilst 'inwardly exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by cultural interpretations'. The production of data used in this paper will reveal emotive incidences of vulnerability experienced by me as an insider, by virtue of being a 'native', but also as a researcher studying my 'own people' in relation to cultural experiences. In examining the interrelationship between self and culture, autoethnography is situated within the interpretivist research paradigm, recognising that reality is subjective and recurrently changing. Autoethnographic

research is useful within the qualitative research paradigm because the researcher possesses a cultural identity and retrospectively write about epiphanies that stem from being part of a culture (Ellis, 2004). However, the use of autoethnography has been criticized for its reliance of 'self' as the primary source of data. Illustrating this point, Holt (2003) discovered that peer reviewers provided commentary on his autoethnography and their feedback aimed at making his research more realist so they could evaluate it against set criteria. Despite this criticism, in line with autoethnographic tradition, this article aims to disrupt and challenge the ways in which traditional research silences the researcher's voice in its drive for objectivity, control, and predictability (Ellis, 2004). Hence, using autoethnography together with CRT's counter-storytelling, I can use self-reflexivity and resistant narratives (Huber, 2010) that are connected to an ethnic minority group's struggle of racism and marginalisation.

Critical race's counter-storytelling methodology

The main aim of this article is to problematise the contradictions and tensions characterising this notion of race in everyday life, higher education and social work practice. Historically, the marginalised have been represented through traditional social science paradigms, often misrepresenting or overlooking marginalized groups and their concerns about racism (Rodriguez, 2006). Moreover, much of the theories constructed in educational literature is based on cultural deprivation theories that is often cast in a language of failure and deficit, regularly drawing on racial stereotyping. Educational researchers require a language that draws on race-based theories, such as CRT to examine race and racism in education. By way of illustration, CRT provides a language and a space for ethnic minorities to voice their educational experiences and gain visibility in academic discourse (Solorzano et al., 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Also, race-based methods provided a space for critique of legal and social institutions for their perpetuation of inequality. It also offered useful insights into scrutinising the role of education for students of colour (Rodriguez, 2006). Placing race back on the agenda, Critical Race methodology, derived from Solórzano and Yosso (2002) provides a convincing framework identifying how prevailing conceptions of race sustain relations of dominance, repression and injustice (Modiri, 2012). Rooted in a social constructivist paradigm, CRT contends that reality is constructed by individuals. Because of the use of narrative, some scholars have tied CRT to qualitative research methods (Nebeker, 1998). Critical Race theorists claim that counter-storytelling is a powerful tool of reframing and re-articulating the stories of people from marginalised groups whose experiences are not often told (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

By using counter-storytelling, critical race methodology challenges 'objective' and 'neutral' master narratives of storytelling typically used to marginalise, typecast and oppress people of colour (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Through CRT methodology, I can provide narratives that challenge racial stereotypes and unmask the experiences of those who are Mixed-race, female and resident on the notorious Cape Flats, known for its high crime rates and unemployment. Knowing what it is like growing up in this community, I remain sceptical of the neoliberalist rhetoric which emphasizes individual responsibility and the merits of hard work but overlooks the debilitating effects of broader socio-structural inequalities. Demonstratively seen in the appallingly low-quality provision of

housing, education, health, employment and terrifying dangers of gangsterism on the Cape Flats. Highlighting my trajectory, this paper distinguishes my academic achievements, but also feature the racial injury, significant loss, sacrifice, humiliation and guilt in seeing my friends and neighbours locked in life on the Cape Flats. CRT methodology acknowledges that those who have experienced the pain of racism and oppression, have developed a complex understanding of the intricate ways that race, class and gender intersect, ultimately naming the racialised experiences that often remain nameless in scholarly texts (Rodriguez, 2006). In sharing counter-stories, the marginalised become creators of knowledge with insight into racism and the way that it often underlies our legitimate way(s) of knowing (Rodriguez, 2006). Here, it is also important to recognise that Solórzano and Yosso (2002) identified two key aspects integral to counter-storytelling: theoretical sensitivity and cultural sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) recognises the researcher's special insight and ability to interpret and give meaning to data. Regarding cultural sensitivity (Bernal, 1998), it denotes the capability of individuals as members of socio-historical communities to accurately read and construe the meaning of informants. Taken together, these concepts are important for this paper as it underscore the idea of sensitivity to meanings entrenched in narratives. There are three genres of counter-stories: personal stories, other people's stories, and composite stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Limitations of the study

Given the unapologetic use of emotion in my study, there is the problem of bias. One step to address this is to make the research visible through written narratives that offered scope for an intensive description and analysis of a situation and meaning for those involved (Henning et al., 2004). Dialogues with friends and other researchers at work conferences provided academic space to examine data, prompting revisions if necessary. Yet, there is a lack of consensus on the amount and type of researcher influence that is acceptable, and whether and how it needs to be 'controlled' and accounted for (Ortlipp, 2008). Ordinarily, autoethnography opens the possibility of subjectivity and limit generalisability. Nevertheless, generalisability was not the intended goal of the study; what I address is the issue of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as similar processes might be taking place in the experiences of other Mixed-race and marginalised communities subjected to comparable experiences of racism.

Data collection and analysis

In accordance with autoethnographic research, I am the subject under exploration. Accordingly, I wrote narratives with rich descriptions recorded in reflective research journals, foregrounding ideas of home, belonging and social justice. Keeping self-reflective journals is a strategy used in qualitative research that can facilitate reflexivity, whereby researchers use their journal to examine subjective experiences. However, there is limited guidance on how to keep a reflective journal from a methodological perspective or how to use it as a research trail (Ortlipp, 2008). In engaging in reflexivity, autoethnographers bring a positioning on the data generated in research. This is in keeping with the interpretivist paradigm, underlining how that perspective can potentially generate new

knowledge. At the time of writing this paper, I am a UK resident, lecturer in Social Work and in regular contact with my mother, the only surviving parent in South Africa. My father's sudden death a few years ago, triggered the start of the journaling process. Handwritten memories and reflections of the significance he has played in my accomplishments, formed the basis for Vignette 1. These journal entries were tear-stained, irregular and written over a five-month period. Moreover, it was the tragic death of George Floyd that raised further painful memories of racism and gave rise to the recollections written in Vignette 2 and 3 of this paper. It was the Black Lives Matter movement that gave me courage to share these painfully private, racialised stories amongst colleagues at conference presentations on social justice. In order to enhance the reliability of my accounts, I spoke with my sister and fellow Mixed-race South African friends, which strengthened my resolve to tell my story and present my experiences in the most meaningful manner. I used different aspects of my journal entries that provided a lifespan view: reflections of my childhood and university experiences, my professional social work experiences, ending with reflections of my experiences as a mother.

The analysis of autoethnographic data is consistent with many forms of the interpretivist paradigm: it is not undertaken separately from data collection, as the analysis and interpretation of data inform and enhance subsequent elements of data collection (Ellis, 2004). There are three common approaches to analysing ethnographic data, including narrative analysis, thematic analysis and structural analysis. Narrative analysis or 'thinking with the story' was appropriate, because it is concerned with the meaning of experience, the human qualities on personal or professional dimensions, and the research as a story (Ellis, 2004). For cultural understanding to develop, data analysis and interpretation must shift attention back-and-forth between self and others, the personal and social. In turn, producing layered texts containing narratives combined with analytical writing (Ellis, 2004). These writings were kept in a paper folder for the write-up and analysis of the three vignettes discussed below.

Presentation of data

Vignette 1: when two opposing worlds collide: growing up on the gang-ridden Cape Flats and studying at the prestigious University of Cape Town (UCT)

I grew up on the bleak, hostile Cape Flats and gained first-hand experience of living with the daily threat of gang violence, gun crime and deprivation. Having very little means, my parents turned to religion and education and made a conscious decision to attend Church and enrolled us in comprehensive schools in the neighbouring middle-class suburb outside the Cape Flats area, known for its higher academic standards of education. It was in these moments during my first years of schooling, that us as children were able to escape the everyday reality of working-class life on the Cape Flats. Social class differences amongst the Mixed-race communities could not be overlooked; thus, what I am saying here does not reflect the narratives of the entire Mixed-race community. Through sheer determination, my Dad worked hard to give us better prospects and eventually secured better-paid employment at a science laboratory, where he started off doing manual work and was later trained in more complex duties. He was often racially abused and denied opportunities for job promotion, despite his high-level knowledge

and skills about laboratory work. Despite his deep-seated unhappiness at work, Dad used these exploitative work conditions to plan and pay for our future. At the start of secondary school, we were told that my twin sister and I were to go to university instead of the clothing factory where Mum worked as a machinist; my brother was to attend a technical school to acquire a trade in the engineering field. What my parents lacked in cultural knowledge of secondary and university education, they more than compensated through their collective efforts of saving funds, paying for school fees, extra tuition, school travel and related costs. Growing up in the slum neighbourhood gave me a deep-seated knowledge of marginalisation, substance abuse, economic hardship and precarious living on the Cape Flats. It also served as great motivation for studying Social Work.

As I approached the final year of secondary schooling as a seventeen-year-old, I realised that my university application was fraught with complications. Not only did I have to compete and contend with severe academic, financial and travel constraints, but there was also the full-force of the quota system underpinning the stringent selection process. I was one of a small minority of so-called Mixed-race and Black students who were granted access on the BSocSc Social Work course in a prestigious Department. In consequence, my identical twin sister and I parted ways and she studied the same course at the University of Western Cape (UWC), predominantly accessed by so-called Mixed-race students. Certainly, the political tide was changing, following Nelson Mandela's release from prison in February 1990, which influenced political reforms promoting affirmative action and equal opportunity policies across all social institutions. However, given UCT's international reputation for academic excellence and research, these policy changes were slow-moving in an institution that operated along racial discrimination. It was during my first year at UCT that I experienced for the first time what it was like being taught with White and Black students. It felt exhilarating, intimidating but most importantly, the experience demystified any lingering thoughts of 'who' or 'what' it felt like having friends across racial divides. Strikingly, there was a lack of representation of diversity in the Department, Faculty and University, amplifying racial and social class divisions, increasing social isolation and making it harder for students like me to ask for help and not wanting to draw further attention to myself. This academic setting also reinforced the reality that there was a distinct difference between the lived experiences of Mixed-race and Black students. I stumbled upon this discovery when I went to Student Finance on campus, desperate to ease the financial burden on my father who was clearly struggling financially. So, when I requested financial assistance in the form of a scholarship or bursary funding, I was bluntly told: *'Sorry, you're not Black enough'*. In that moment, those words caused immediate pain, escalated financial worries but strengthened my resolve to attain academic excellence on the degree course.

The family income progressively improved, but there was no 'happily ever after'; far from it! Finances were depleted, considerably delaying the prospect of moving to a new house in a safer neighbourhood. Years were lost and my parents' goal to raise three children in a suburb, never materialised. Instead, we were young adults leading independent lives, by the time the house was finally built, and the house move occurred. Privately, I was hurting because it meant that I missed out on a childhood dream of having my own bedroom and being able to study without the noise of gun shots and gang violence. Despite the tight grip of systemic discrimination, I persevered and pursued my postgraduate studies whilst working full time as a social worker. In the process, acquiring

an Honours and subsequently master's degree, whilst resident in the two bedroomed flat on the Cape Flats. My continual experiences of racial oppression at UCT created deeply painful, emotional scars. During those years, I graduated with three degrees and the reinforced belief that I was a second-class citizen.

Vignette 2: microaggressions and good practice in social work practice

As soon as I graduated, I found employment with a large non-profit organisation registered as a Child Protection Agency and was placed in one of the regional offices working amongst Mixed-race communities. The social work staff and community were likewise Mixed-race, and we were dealing with various child protection matters. I discovered that the issue of race seemed largely invisible in my social work practice, when working in environments where everyone in the office and out on home visits spoke the same language and shared the same racial identity. However, this issue of racism emerged when I did locum social work for one month in a Black, Xhosa-speaking community. The social work team was Black too. Most of the cases allocated to me was around sexual abuse and although I was an experienced social worker, it was difficult to undertake child protection investigations in an environment where the staff and service users viewed me as an 'outsider'. There were language barriers, which created power imbalances and collusion amongst family support workers and colleagues who had to interpret but wouldn't always interpret everything in conversation amongst themselves or service users. There was an air of suspicion [probably because they too had very minimal experience of racial integration]. I couldn't wait for this employment period to end.

I came to the UK in April 2001 and started my social work career in Child Protection; an experience I would always value and cherish with fond memories. Initially, it was a shocking experience to discover that the region was predominantly White and that I was one of a few ethnic minority social workers. My Team Manger made a conscious effort making me feel welcomed. He thus created regular intervals for informal chats and facilitated a team environment that provided a sense of belonging. You could ask questions and there was margin for error. My confidence increased, I felt less embarrassed about my accent and I knew that I was in a positive work environment that enabled me to transfer my prior social work knowledge and competence as a social worker in child protection. However, when I changed employment years later, I had a contrasting experience whereby racism reared its ugly head again. Naturally, it was an 'all-White' workforce and I was the only ethnic minority on the team and the building. I had great confidence in my capacity to do the job, aided by the master's qualification, which not many had, including my Team Manager. Instinctively, I had the sense that she didn't like me, but didn't know the reason for this. What I soon discovered was that she presumed that I was incompetent, this, despite my academic achievements and extensive social work experience. Regularly, I found myself in situations whereby she invalidated these accomplishments and created moments, which made me feel incompetent. For instance, although I was highly experienced in court report writing, my Team Manager would read through my court reports (which did not look much different to how others have been writing), and practically re-wrote large sections of my reports without explaining what I did wrong. When I asked for a template or an example of what was considered 'good practice', none was forthcoming.

No mentor was provided, and the Team Manger often appeared too busy to approach for advice. I had the feeling that there was no latitude for error. Microaggression was noticeable in her practice and evident in the daily slights aimed at me and my qualifications. It was seen in the direct display of racism and questions over the credibility of my qualifications and experience; insults at my apparent failings when it comes to report writing; tutting and eye-rolling; sighing in exasperation. When I once challenged her, she reminded me of her power as manager and implicit authority to block any career prospects in the organisation. It was evident that White colleagues in the team were favoured: some full-time staff got into the habit of working 4-hour days only, others habitually struggled and missed deadlines, but all these practices went unchallenged. The regular microaggressions and invalidations knocked my confidence, increased feelings of stress and isolation and resulted in me leaving the job out of self-preservation. Fortunately, this was the only experience of racism during my extensive social work career in the UK.

Vignette 3: 'She can't possibly be your daughter (!)'

When I became a mother of my firstborn, I never anticipated that I would be on the receiving end of this dominant narrative and misplaced assumption that parents all share the same racial appearance as their children. Much to my own shock and surprise, I gave birth to a beautiful, fair-skinned Keziah with hazel eyes and in toddler years having long, brown-blond European hair. I soon detected that our racial difference sparked issues in the wider community and led to microaggressions and painful encounters. There was a notable air of suspicion from parents and professional staff during my visits to the baby clinic and toddler groups. I distinctly remember one of the most painful microaggressions, five years ago at the London Aquatic Centre when a nine-year-old Keziah was for the first time competing in the county swimming championships. Although she was excited, at some stage she felt completely overwhelmed and became emotionally distressed. The swimming coach signalled for me to make my way to the changing room area where I could get Keziah and give her emotional assurance. However, seated outside the doors of the changing room was a Black security guard officer, who refused me entry and when I pleaded with him to find my daughter indoors, he asked for a description. I described Keziah to him, at which point he appeared stunned and told me not to lie as I was describing a White child. He said, *'She can't possibly be your daughter!'* Instantaneously, I felt angry, upset and powerless but decided to remain calm as I was desperate to get to Keziah, who also suffers with asthma triggered by emotional upset. Determined, I finally persuaded him to look for Keziah. He found a very emotionally distressed Keziah indoors, confused as to how to reach the exit door of the changing room area. She cried and asked to see her mummy. He asked for a description and when she said her mum is 'Brown', he said *'What? You mean she has brown hair'*? She said, *'No, my mummy is "Brown". Please take me to her as she's waiting for me?'*

Analysis of findings: critical discussion

An intersectional analysis of these narratives identifies three key themes: the gatekeeping function of racism, racial 'othering' in social work practice and racially inclusive social work.

Theme 1: gatekeeping function of racism

In using CRT's counter-storytelling, fittingly, it has enabled me to illustrate how racism operates at various levels and in different social context. For instance, Vignette 1 highlights structural racism evident in South Africa's segregationist legislation and how it gave rise to severe structural inequalities and socio-economic disadvantage on the Cape Flats. It describes personal struggles, manifold loss and racial injury whilst also drawing attention to the wider implications of harsh, racist governance processes overseeing university admissions and UCT's Social Work Department likewise gatekeeping 'who' have access to this prestigious university and its renowned academic credentials. Accordingly, UCT was placed out of reach: financially, geographically and symbolically it was distanced from many local, working class, Mixed-race and Black communities. In adopting a CRT framework, it identified neoliberal racism and exposed how it obscures racism through 'the privatisation of racial discourse' centred on 'denial regarding how power and politics promote racial discrimination and exclusion' within neoliberalism (Giroux, 2006, p. 78).

Yes, I am one of a substantial minority of students of colour who has been able to cross barriers to selective, higher educational opportunity. Nevertheless, in using counter-storytelling, it enabled me to critically reflect on my precarious position of being an ethnic minority female student, living on the dangerous Cape Flats, whilst attending an elite, predominantly White and expensive university course. Being a social work student, my narratives reveal the utter challenge and sacrifice involved in gaining access, staying on the course and completing the degrees. Yes, perhaps my life example could be considered a success story and testimony of upward social mobility, referring to the movement of individuals changing social position different to what has been assigned in early life (Boliver & Wakeling, 2017). However, here I would state that I was rather 'blessed' or 'lucky', whichever you prefer, because my father was financially wise and regularly saved money towards our education (at the expense of him not eating). My dad managed to find better-paid, permanent employment as a worker in a laboratory albeit he faced regular racial discrimination and exploitative work conditions. Whilst most of my friends' fathers on the Cape Flats were either absent, unemployed, or working as a labourer in the building industry or related lower income. My father's salary was spent on school transport and fees (all state schools charged school fees in South Africa). He had foresight and knew that travelling outside the boundaries of the Cape Flats was pivotal for us to access essential cultural capital (know-how) and social capital (social networks). Hence, demonstrating agency in ensuring that we attended church and schools in middle-class suburbs. Mainly because our immediate neighbourhood lacked the necessary social and cultural capital including schools with higher-quality education. Neither was there anyone in my neighbourhood to consult when advice was needed on completing university applications and understanding how the process worked. The point I am trying to make is this: most of my friends on the Cape Flats did not have a fighting chance of succeeding and defying those stereotypical assumptions by escaping the perilous life in the community. Everywhere one looked, were dilapidated school buildings, gang violence, alcoholism and high levels of unemployment. Most of my peers had realistic aspirations to 'become someone', but the odds were stacked against them. Structural racism and power inequalities ensured that life opportunities were blocked for most people on the Cape Flats.

Theme 2: racial 'othering' in social work practice

The last place I expected to face racial microaggression was in the social work workplace. Particularly, because Social Work as a profession has a commitment to diversity, made prominent in its accreditation standards (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018). Both South African and English social work regulatory awarding bodies professed a commitment to social justice as one of the core ethical principles of the profession (British Association of Social Workers [BASW], 2014; International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014; Social Work England, 2019; South African Council of Social Service Professions [SACSSP], 2004). However, Vignette 2 evidenced a disjuncture from these professional values in social work practice. It reflected my experiences of racial oppression and 'othering', typified in the form of interpersonal discrimination described. Echoing my reality, Dominelli (2002) identified that 'othering' gives rise to social oppression, exclusion from hierarchies of power and results in those who are othered, being viewed as pathological. This point was illustrated in humiliating incidents, for example, around court report writing and the lack of transparency over good practice models. These are instances of microaggressions, which Huber and Solorzano (2014) acknowledge was often used to legitimate the interests or positions of a dominant group over non-dominant groups.

I have discovered that when ethnic minority social workers are 'othered', it is a 'lonely voice', made harder to articulate in teams where there is a low minority presence. When I experienced racism in both social work teams, there was a distinct lack of racial representation, which in my case, fostered conditions for microaggressions in the workplace. Vignette 2 also illustrated how, as the only ethnic minority social worker in the team, it became extremely difficult to use my voice and challenge discriminatory workplace behaviour. Recruitment of more ethnic minority social workers can diversify the workforce and establish a sense of solidarity amongst those racially marginalised. CRT draws attention to this scarcity of ethnic minority presence in work areas and rather sees it as a foil that diverts any considered analysis of the dominance of whiteness through which people are judged and favoured (Williams & Parrott, 2013). I saw this lack of analysis in the UK social work team, whereby the everyday racially oppressive work conditions were overlooked by both the manager and White colleagues. Hence, any form of structural racism or microaggression within these workplaces could therefore go unchallenged. I was the 'minority' being othered and kept 'the outsider'.

Racist social work practices breach professional ethics and contravenes the social justice principles underpinning Anti-oppressive practice (AOP) and Anti-discriminatory practice (ADP) within the social work profession. AOP affirms oppression in societies, economies and groups and is used to develop practice that actively seeks to lessen, eradicate or negate the cause of that oppression through 'emancipatory' or 'empowering' practice (Dominelli, 2002). Furthermore, ADP illustrates the action taken to avoid or obstruct any form of discrimination against individuals and communities; it is mostly associated with legal actions as a result of equality legislation (Dominelli, 2002). Taken together, AOP and ADP ensure that all individuals, regardless of human differences are treated with dignity, humanity, professional respect and inclusive practice. This professional conduct should be consistent, and the described professional courtesy should be extended to colleagues of ethnic minority background too. However, AOP

doesn't address white-on-white or black-on-black racial discrimination (Laird, 2008). This painful, complex reality of racial injustice was evidenced in Vignettes 2 and 3, accentuating the fact that Black people too can inflict racism on others. Feelings of isolation and confusion dominated my thoughts when my Black social work counterparts showed through their actions, that I was not considered as 'one of them'; I was 'othered'. Campion (2019) discovered similar experiences and draws on the concept of 'horizontal hostility' to describe the complex ways in which Mixed-race individuals, on occasion, experience discourses of Black (in)authenticity in interactions with their Black counterparts and as a consequence, feel rejected from a collective Black identity.

Theme 3: racial inclusion in social work

The reality that racial microaggressions occur in social work practice is astonishing and frankly should not happen in the first place, but it does! In both cases, there was an evident lack of racial representation in the workforce, which, in the South African experience gave rise to horizontal hostility. In the English team, being outnumbered in racial representation resulted in oppressive, humiliating and destructive work conditions that diminished any professional credibility acquired over the years. The point is this, if the Team Manager and social workers have not critically examined their own positioning around power, oppression, race, inequality and privilege, and they share a similar oppressive mindset in the workforce, legitimised through their actions in the work environment, then there is a strong indication that racist social work practices are likely to occur. This, even though social justice is a core value in the social work profession.

The two racialised employment periods, however, were isolated experiences. In England, where I spent over 19 years of social work practice, I have been working in predominantly White social work teams who have shown professional respect, was approachable, friendly, valued you as a person, respected religious and cultural differences and welcomed difficult conversations on race and ethnic differences. Vignette 2 demonstrated that the Manager created a team culture that showed respect and empathy. He assigned mentors who were experienced, and they were equally motivated to support ethnic minority social workers in their professional growth.

Implications for social work

Social workers have to always keep an open mind and be racially sensitive when working with multi-racial families, especially given the high likelihood that they may have already experienced a sustained period of marginalisation, suspicion and 'othering' during their interactions with professionals and the wider public. Social work teams that have greater racial diversity, are in a much stronger position to demonstrate racially sensitive practice, facilitating the exchange of different voices and practice ideologies. Which potentially could have avoided the racially oppressive work environments described in Vignette 2.

Recruiting more ethnic minority social workers would help to identify norms of whiteness and discriminatory attitudes, which tend to remain hidden and unchallenged in our assessments, recruitment, report writing, decisions, conversations and interactions with ethnic minorities. Thus, enhancing racial equality principles within ADP and AOP in contemporary social work practice. Indeed, the concepts of ADP and AOP have long

since become part of mainstream thinking and have lost their political edge (Cocker & Hafford-Letchfield, 2014). I agree that we certainly need to rethink how social work understands the complexity of human interactions and experiences (Cocker & Hafford-Letchfield, 2014). One way of achieving this is through adopting CRT and intersectionality as a combined practice model, thereby critically examining inequalities and placing race on the agenda. Difficult conversations about power, privilege, oppression and racism are necessary to develop race consciousness and promote social and racial justice in social work practice. Social workers should be encouraged in the workplace to explore their own privilege and power, the diversity of their own positioning and are required to reflexively focus on this privilege (Williams & Parrott, 2013) as a necessary starting point to practice in a racially inclusive way.

Adopting a CRT perspective combined with intersectionality, would strengthen social work practice in an increasingly diverse England. Being trained in CRT and intersectionality, social workers would actively guard against 'othering' and critically consider the intersections of gender, race, maternity and social class influences on people's lives. Meaning, they would likely have profound knowledge of racialised experiences and the extent to which it could adversely impact mothers and babies at a critical stage of parenthood. Vignette 3 signalled complications around this dominant perception on race and maternity. Social workers need to develop a race consciousness and remember that it is possible for parents not to share the same racial appearance as their children. Racially diverse social work teams could help challenge any imagined construct of what a family ought to look like in terms of racial orientation. They will know that some mothers who were 'othered', could distrust professionals and dread occupying spaces where they were likely to be stared at and talked about. Which most likely could result in them avoiding maternity and health services appointments altogether; a dangerous prospect for safeguarding when it comes to the close monitoring of a child's health and wellbeing.

Ignorance of meta-narratives around race could become a further barrier to safeguarding practice with children and adults. Social workers trained in CRT, would not only know that there was a high likelihood that ethnic minority families were likely to lack the required family support, given the possibility that close relatives live in a different country or in another part of England. However, they would also understand that ethnic minority families tend to draw on religious communities as substitute families, who might offer appropriate support and therefore should not be dismissed outright. Drawing on intersectionality, these social workers will appreciate that social class differences have bearing, because in my case, some parents might pay expensive fees of the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) to seek out specialist advice and close friendships to assist with maternity support and child rearing guidance. Bound by race but we are not a homogenous community.

Conclusion

This paper draws on CRT's counter-storytelling methodology to provide empirical understandings of the effects of racism and micro-aggressions as shown in my personal and professional lives. It problematises this notion of social mobility and argues that given the complex ways in which broader structural inequalities operate within the

Cape Flats, residents have minimal opportunity to acquire enhanced life outcomes in accessing quality academic education and the required social and cultural capital presently lacking within the boundaries of the Cape Flats. It identifies contradictions and tensions, characterising the existence of racial microaggressions in social work practices in both South Africa and England and how this racist behaviour towards colleagues cause racial injury, oppression and marginalisation in the workplace. Good practice examples were shared, and the paper makes the argument for greater racial representations in social work teams. This paper argues for a combined CRT and intersectionality approach so that social work practice is strengthened in an increasingly diverse England. Further autoethnographic research is fundamentally needed to elicit critical understanding of race matters in social work practice. Finally, the article argues that experiences of racism and marginalisation can painfully violate life chances, but despite this, there are spaces for empathy, resilience and attainment of aspirational goals in favourable circumstances.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

Carlene Cornish is Originally from South Africa, she have both national and international academic and professional qualifications in Social Work, Criminology, Sociology, and Education. These qualifications led to employment in Child Protection, Youth Offending Service, National Probation Service and Higher Education. Her research interest focuses on Race, Social Work, Sociology of Education, and NEET youth. She is a registered social worker with Social Work England and the British Association for Social Workers. Currently, she is employed with the University of East Anglia (UEA) as Lecturer in Social Work, Admissions Director for Social Work and Sociology in the School of Social Work; UEA Social Work Lead for the Social Work Teaching Partnership.

ORCID

Carlene Cornish 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3488-7968

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