

Chapter 13

The Role of Black Academics

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the very important role that black academics have in to play in relation to the experiences of black students and black professionals' and considers the positive contribution they can make to the experiences of black learners. The writing in this chapter relates to the overall research aim in terms of the experiences of black professionals, academics and educators. Exploration of the experiences shared by black lecturers and students, during the Co-operative Inquiry, fueled my interest in exploring the role we play as black academics in the life of black students and in examining our positions as we engage with students, educational institutions and black communities.

Action inquiry into my practice as a lecturer also challenged me to ask, "What are black academics for?" "What role do I play in the classroom and in the wider system?" "What is my status, as a teacher, within the current bureaucratic constraints of the university?" This led to an exploration of my personal experiences as a black woman academic and an examination of my ambivalence and the dilemmas I have faced. I have chosen to explore my experiences as a social work educator by examining arenas in which I am located in my work: - the university, the social work department, the classroom and my professional identity.

In this account, I weave in my personal experiences as I explore the dilemmas that black academics face and present theoretical and practical representations of these dilemmas. I go on to explore the implications of these experiences for of the politics for change, which I have located within the approach I advocated in Chapter 11, a critical educative approach. My experience as an academic black woman is not unique because of the reality of black people's shared experience of oppression; on the contrary, it will be familiar to other black people working in academic institutions.

What are some of our dilemmas, Ambivalence and Contradictions?

Today, a small percentage of black people is teaching in universities in Britain. A smaller percentage yet teach on social work courses, and they are, in fact, still in the minority; in some cases they either sit at the margins of the institution or are isolated in their departments or faculty. Some, among us, are radicalised, black, critical thinkers who have been silenced by various pressures imposed by a white, patriarchal, middle-class system of domination and, indeed, some of us have taken to silencing ourselves.

We are constantly negotiating the positions that we occupy and there is no distinct separation between 'us' and 'them'. Instead, we adopt different strategies in order to manage the contradictions of identity and to move within and across the borderlands of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, as an academic, I can simultaneously occupy a position of power and powerlessness (Simmonds 1992). This arises out of an 'in between' academic status of being simultaneously belonging and not belonging, insider and outsider, included and excluded. I shall explore this status from the 'ground' of my personal and professional experience in the world of academia.

Belonging/Not Belonging:

Most of my life in Britain I have felt like, what Wise (1997) describes as, an 'in-betweenie', never belonging to the environment in which I found myself. Stanley (1997) describes the experience of in-betweenies thus:

"Being 'in' and 'out' may be a state of mind deeply embedded in some of us, the in-betweenies, but for many more it is an actual interstitial state lying on the boundaries of academia... Academia, that strange world within a world, is also still life-changingly welcoming... The invitation is there with all its limitations and problems" (p.183).

In taking up its invitation, I have had to deal with the overwhelming feeling of confusion as a result of complex experiences of ambivalence and contradictions as a black woman. However I deal with these contradictions, with being an "in betweenie", it seems clear that they offer an interesting way of understanding my position in the social world and how ontology relates to epistemology.

Like others who share such an ontological position, I am constantly required to account for what I am doing here, what it means, for me, to be here. In what follows, I explore

Link to: http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/a_bryan.html

how I 'fit' in relation to my job of work as an academic, a site where the identities of black, feminist, working class and woman form an alien territory.

How do I 'fit' in relation to my job of work as an academic?

To be able to answer this question I want to explore my home self and my professional experience of being an insider/outsider, my identity and my experiences in the classroom.

Home and Work

The disjunction that I feel between myself and my role in academia has a physical and practical manifestation. Each day I embark on a one and a half-hour's journey from Brixton, an inner-city district, which is inhabited by a large proportion of black people, and which separates my home from work in Twickenham, a leafy suburb with predominantly white, middle class inhabitants my home self from my professional self. The journey home from work is a physical territory, a borderland. But this geographical space is also a symbolic space, one in which I try to make sense of the way that I live and the work that I do. Fiona Wise puts it well when she says:

"My 'work' self sleeps in a different bed, drinks different water, engages with different people, from my 'home' self. In this parallel universe I 'become' a different person because everything and everyone that I interact with, and define myself by, changes"(Wise1997, p.120).

I have been doing this journey for thirteen years now, and I know I am not alone in this situation. Many colleagues and black friends, some of whom are black managers and others who are in senior positions in white organisations, are leading such an existence, the 'Jekylls' and 'Hydes' of academia, of professional life. We have to go where the work is and in higher education the openings are few and the locations rarely convenient.

My Professional Experiences - Insider/outsider

Working in a university setting, I often feel very isolated as I work in an environment predominately occupied by white people. I, like some other black academics, confront a world that outsiders might imagine would welcome our presence but, from my experience, we are sometimes experienced as unwelcome. In the department in which I work, for example, our presence as black academics is desired and some of my white colleagues are comfortable with it. However, they are less welcoming of black women who present themselves as radically committed to change, who need institutional support, time, and space to pursue this dimension of their reality. As a result some of us experience isolation and turn to black communities for support.

Some black academics who take seriously the life of the mind, live in an isolated and insulated world. Some of us are caught in an ambivalent position of wanting to be an insider and an outsider simultaneously, wanting to be part of the institution but at the same time stay close to our communities. We sometimes face a grim predicament of being caught between the institution's expectations, their defined position of us as 'intruders' 'outsiders' and the black community's expectations. This experience can be fraught with fear and anxiety provoking.

When I made the transition from practice to academia I experienced a degree of isolation because I feared becoming too identified as an "insider" and felt that I might jeopardise my credibility within my community. So I chose to continue to work with black community groups, projects and organisations outside the university as a way of confirming my loyalty and commitment to them. Doing so was also one of the ways in which I got support and felt valued; I have found that my continuous involvement with my community has helped to sustain my beliefs and helped shape my action and change. This, I believe, is a necessary support mechanism for any agent of radical change. Meyerson and Scully, (1995) support this in their statement:

"The tempered radical's understanding of injustice can only be preserved by continuing to identify with outsiders. Identifying as an outsider reminds her of her own privilege as an insider" (p. 597).

However, experiences as outsiders in some black communities, can also be isolating if we do not fit into the needs and wants of the communities. The black community does not always conceive our contradictions in such a way as to offer us support that support, but instead, its conception of us can also contribute to our fear and isolation.

How do Black Communities' perceptions of us contribute to our fear and isolation?

There is a deep distrust and suspicion in some black communities, of black academics. This distrust is based on what is sometimes seen as black academics not remaining, in some visible way, organically linked with black cultural life. The black community lauds those black academics who excel as political activists and cultural artists whilst the intellectual life is viewed as solely short-term political gain and social status. This limited perception of intellectual activity is held by some black academics themselves. Given the constraints on black, upward, social mobility and pressure for status, power and affluence, many of us seek material gain and cultural prestige. This search requires some of us to immerse ourselves in the very culture and society, which degrades and

devalues the black community from which we come. We tend therefore, to fall in two camps, crudely put: – “successful” distant from the black community, and “unsuccessful”, disdainful of the white academic world. Both camps remain marginal to the black community, suspended between two worlds with little or no black infra-structural base. The black community views both alternatives with distrust.

This situation has resulted in a major obstacle confronting black academics which is the relative lack of black community support; resulting in the suspended status of black academics and their isolation. Some of us choose, then, to deny our intellectual ability so as not to confront this reality. Others may choose to be academics but eschew the category “intellectual” or “academic”. I too had engaged in this denial and for a while shunned the category of academic. In 1997, I reflected on my status and identity in my journal.

Journal Extract: Taking on the identity as an academic

I am always intrigued to hear others call me an academic. I work in the academic world and yet I am scared of academia. I remembered being in a car journey with my partner and his niece and him referring to me as ‘the academic’ in relation to himself. His niece tried to engage him in a conversation and prefaced her reasons for asking this with “you are the intellectual.” and he replied “*Agnes is the academic she is doing her PhD*”. I heard myself being described as an academic and I felt surprised. I certainly would not have chosen to describe myself as an academic because it did not fit with my notions of what an academic is.

My view of academics is that they can be exclusive and elitist and I don’t view myself in that way. I did not plan to be a teacher or lecturer nor had visions of a career in an academic institution. I went to work in an academic institution with an implicit purpose of educating and training black students and I think that the university is a legitimate place to do that. I have little intention of getting into the fabric of the institution, of becoming part of the institution. I do not identify with it or become too identified with it for fear that I lose myself, my black identity. Nor do I want to be estranged or feel alienated from my community. My dilemma is, how can I continue to pursue my purpose explicitly without being in the university setting. For ‘being in’ do I need to have taken on the values of the university, the identity of an academic? If I do what would it mean for me, for black students, my family, my community? How will it affect my relationship with those parties? Will their view of me as a black person change? How can I avoid feeling I have compromised or that I have ‘sold out’? I suppose I might have to accept that to many people, I am an academic.

Acceptance of this identity has caused me to reflect on the meaning of my identity, my relationship with the academy and with my students. As I become more and more involved in the life of the students and the developments in the department, I experience more of a pull to being on the 'inside' in the mainstream of the university. As my position changes I become closer to the centre of my department, where I have accumulated diverse experiences, as I strive to change social work education and to change social work practice by introducing an anti-oppressive and black perspectives agenda into social work.

The Meaning of my Identity - Multiple Identities

My identity as a black female lecturer is significant in determining the particularities of my experiences and in challenging the expectations of others with whom I work. My 'race' and gender are inseparable aspects of my identity and are configured in particular ways, which shape the specificity of my relationship with academia and with my students. In the context of my professional self, my identities not only structure how I feel about myself in my role as an academic, but they influence how others see me and respond to me. The 'others' who respond to my presentation of self are students, colleagues, including especially importantly black colleagues, and the wider academic community. In an interactionist sense how these others define me makes up a large part of who I am or am allowed to be. My own perception of my role is mediated by the social relations in which I operate; they both constrain and enable me to perform the social role of 'black academic'.

In the academic setting, my identity as a black woman with a 'working class' background predominates and deeply affects the way that I feel about the work that I do. This is because white people (other academics and many students), who speak differently, surround me and for all I know, think differently. Paradoxically, because I have used a similar educational institution to effect my own social mobility, and because I now work in such an institution, I am, to all intent and purpose, a member of the educated middle class. People, neighbours, family friends, and members of the black community, see me as middle class because they compare me with themselves, whereas colleagues, who might compare me with others in our institution, see me - how? In a way, how they see me isn't important, because what matters is how I see 'myself'. This has epistemological as well as ontological ramifications: It affects what I think I 'know', what I feel some certainty about knowing, and it also affects what I feel about this and accordingly, how I behave.

The way that I feel at work is that although I am 'in' I am not "of" the place and I have, therefore, a critical response to the institution which is embedded in those autobiographical structures and meanings referred to by the shorthand of 'identity'. Similarly, while I occupy the margins of the academy, along with women colleagues, my place on the margin is also fractured along the identity lines of race and class. In the margins my identity of being black and of working class marginalises me yet further, while, in the mainstream, my identity as a woman overlays these other identities.

The notion of working class identity implies a fixity and unity that aren't actually there when I think about this analytically. Analytically, I know that I always felt an outsider even before I got an education and, now I have it, there is no going back - I am not of that class and background anymore. Most of my students are women and a high percentage are black women rather than black men who have come into the university via non-traditional routes to higher education such as access courses. On one level, I identify with them and I can let them know that I, too, have struggled in a racist educational system and that, if I can do it, so can they. What are some of our commonalities?

My Experiences in the Classroom

There are many areas of commonality between my students and myself, which can create for me confusing and frustrating relations between us. I experience some students as having simultaneously high expectations of and, sometimes, little respect for me. Some students expect everything from me: I must be an expert in whatever fields the student needs to write on. I must be able to deal with the contradictory demands that some students impose, which include not only totally up-to-the-minute knowledge of the academic literature and debates on a very wide range of subjects, but also an overview of the current state of (all) spheres of social work practice. I must be able to give cutting-edge opinions on matters to do with race, racism and oppression. I think that black students would learn more from progressive, black literature because these students would then bring into the classroom the unique mixture of experiential and analytical ways of knowing. I do try and provide this, but their expectations are sometimes unrealistic with regard to my knowledge base and intellect.

While I am committed to teaching around the exploration of 'race', class and gender, I am not expert on all aspects of these subjects. Some black students expect me to be their role model in terms of understanding every aspect of racism. Some expect that I have a high level of consciousness of racism, especially internalised racism. They expect me to

challenge racism among students and colleagues alike; to be knowledgeable about the latest titles of books and journals on the subject of race in social work. But I can't meet all these demands. I appreciate that the majority of black students who enter my classrooms have never been taught by black lecturers. However, I can't, simultaneously be the perfect academic and the perfect practitioner or the 'perfect black' role model - a conscious black teacher. As a black academic, I need to avoid becoming an 'expert' and slipping into a teacher-learner relationship of dependency

At the same time as they turn to me as an 'authority', some black students simultaneously deny that authority on the basis of the fact that "I am too much 'like them'". I, too, struggle with resisting and challenging racism and stick closely to my 'grass roots'. If I don't have "airs and graces", then I can't be a proper academic. Most important of all, if I don't dress things up in mystifying language and I am able to explain complex phenomena in everyday, accessible language, then I do not pass the 'real academic' test.

When confronted with a black female teacher, some students reassess not only my role as a teacher but also their own positions as students. I do not fulfil the expectations which many of the students, black and white, have of a black teacher and, therefore, my authority and knowledge are questioned. I do not always fit their conception of what constitutes the obtaining of 'good' education. Many of the students bring with them presuppositions based on colonial and neo-colonial epistemologies. For many students, black as well as white, those who possess the significant knowledge are white men. Some students seem to feel cheated by having a black teacher, feel that they have not got the 'real' thing. If the black teacher is teaching subjects such as race or black issues this feeling is compounded as these subjects are seen by some students as second class. Indeed, some black students boycott these sessions, if given the choice.

Elitism, here, is something which some black students have striven for, and to arrive at the university only to find that your 'own kind' are there before you in positions of authority is an extreme disappointment. How much more gratifying to find a world that *is* different and elitist, but one that you, too, can now join. For other black students, having a black teacher, who does not put on academic airs and graces, is appreciated for exactly those reasons. It signifies for them that I as their teacher have not lost my 'roots', my black identity. My presence challenges the expectations which some white students have of a teacher. A black woman teacher is not the norm in British universities, so, for them, it is a challenge to the status quo. Therefore, I am not the only one who is required to re-

assess and negotiate a space, since my very presence instigates a constant process of negotiation between the re-construction of stereotypes and their denial.

As a black woman in academia, I am not easily placed since my identity and my institutional role, appear and indeed are contradictory. The ambivalence in the ways in which I am perceived enables me to shift in and out of different positions in relation to my institutional role and my relations with students and colleagues. This greater flexibility in negotiating and reflecting on my identity and relationships would not be afforded to those who, by virtue of their 'race' (white) and gender (male), are more readily named and located.

As I shift across borders of 'us' and 'them', at one moment I find allegiances with the experiences of my black female students in particular, and at other times I recognise the power inequalities marked by my position and identity. I often ally myself with my students when we share common experiences, usually in terms of 'race' and 'gender'. While I think that students from a similar background have all kinds of ambivalent feelings about me, I certainly have ambivalent feelings about them. I do not want to be their friend, nor their confidante. I do not want to be 'alongside' my students, but instead I want there to be very clear, explicit and agreed boundaries between us.

While black and female, I am also an academic and recognise the relative power this gives me. In this sense, I do not generally share the same experiences of inequality and powerlessness as my students. This is not to say that all students are in vulnerable and weak positions but they are represented in this way. It is not easy to negotiate this "in-betweenness" but it is something that I confront and consider daily.

I do not feel guilty about the fact that I am in a superior position to my students. Nor do I feel guilty that I have control over an important part of their lives (that is, what degree marks they get or whether they pass or fail the professional training) and that I can be a very influential figure in a black student's development. I do not deny the power that I hold, by making friends of my students and by devising means of not having to assess and evaluate their work, sometimes by going so far as to eschew evaluation altogether. This is all well and good on courses where marks do not matter, but it is totally inadequate for the vast majority of students in higher education. What they need, and what I need, are clear boundaries.

I am in a position of power and authority in relation to their lives and the only safeguard against exploitation of that role is for it to be clearly and unambiguously owned and stated. While they have to jump through hoops and I am the one holding the hoop. It is disingenuous of me to handle my authority through denial of its very existence. Similarly, some students place their black lecturers on an unreal pedestal, hanging on to their every word, taking all their courses, turning up with one 'problem' after another needing lengthy, sometimes tearful discussion. I have long since learnt to recognise the very vulnerable position that students place themselves in. For their sake, as well as mine, this is one of the clearest examples available where clear boundaries are absolutely essential, and where woolly notions of 'sisterhood' are totally inappropriate.

For all that, I have points in common with black students. These are points in common with a past which I can never return to and do not want to return to. I am helping them to escape from an identity which I escaped from myself, in an institutional setting where my current experience gives the lie to that possibility ever being completely successful. Since, despite my acceptance of my academic identity I am only partially accepted by the academy, and my acceptance is dependent on how much I consent to altering my position, my behaviour and identity.

"The discourse of power in the academy has shifted in the past decade from an exclusionary practice to one of selective inclusion, which inscribes certain positions of desire and success for those 'oppositional' elements who consent, perhaps unconsciously, to the position of alterity - a position that is sanctioned only as the exception"(Behdad, 1993, p.46).

Included/Excluded

Tokenised inclusion

I am aware of this selective or tokenised inclusion and have been made aware of it through my experiences in the academy and the daily contradictions of being a black woman academic. Tokenised inclusion does not necessarily signify that radical changes have shifted the balance of power within academia. In fact Behdad suggests,

"This tokenised inclusion renders the conservative grip more efficient and powerful, in that voices of resistance are now somewhat contained in the compartmentalised ghettos of the academy" (Behdad, 1993, p. 47).

While not agreeing wholly with Behdad's pessimism, sincere though it is, there *are* opportunities for black people and feminists within academia to challenge, resist and negotiate. However, he does raise an important issue for those of us who find ourselves in the borderlands of inclusion and exclusion, marginality and centrality. There are many contradictions in these borderlands. In particular, here, I am at the same time marginalised institutionally, yet central in my position as 'expert' in (re) presenting the 'other'. Some of us have found different ways of confronting the issues of being in the borderlands. Some have chosen assimilation as a strategy for coping with the isolation that it brings. White educational institutions and welfare organisations have also chosen assimilation as strategies for providing social legitimation.

Assimilation

There is an implicit demand that we assimilate to succeed. Assimilation, as a social policy, is attractive to some black people as it affords us success, that is, getting a job, acquiring the means to provide materially for our families and for ourselves. Economic distress has created a climate in which some of us have bought into the assimilation process and given up overt resistance to racism as a viable survival strategy.

However, some black academics feel that assimilation is a way of urging people to negate blackness and imitate racist white people. In our research inquiry groups, some of us spoke of discarding signs of militancy (natural hairstyles, dreadlocks, and African dress) when they took up senior positions in white institutions, especially in places where they were isolated and were the 'token' black. Some also spoke of reclaiming our militancy and told stories of how and when they had reclaimed it.

They spoke of how they had lost sight of their initial convictions. It had created a state of enduring ambivalence. For many black progressive academics the spirit of militancy and radical politicisation grows faint, and our spirit is assaulted by feelings of despair and powerlessness. I, myself, I find that I have to work hard to nourish it, to keep it strong. Such is the cost of seeking entry or incorporation into the liberal and conservative mainstream.

It is difficult to resist assimilation on material, psychological and political grounds, because some of us believe that the more formal power and security we have the more we will be in a position to effect change. However, 'It is difficult for black people to transform traditional university structures from within because of our experiences of

marginality' and biculturalism, which, some writers have described as a tenuous balance between two cultural worlds:

“A *marginal person* is one who lives on the boundary of two distinct cultures, one being more difficult than the other, but who does not have the ancestry, *belief system*, or social skills to be fully a member of the dominant cultural group” (Park 1928, Stonequist 1937)(Bell 1990, p.463).

As “outsiders within” we can access the “Knowledge and insight of the insider with the critical attitude of the outsider” (Stonequist 1937, p.155). While the insider status gives us the opportunity for change, the outsider status can cause us to take on a detached posture. It is possible, that at any one time, we may be experiencing passionate concern as well as detached concern.

hooks spoke of how being on the margin could be a source of creativity and transformation:

“Living as we did – on the edge- we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as the margin. We understood both...Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole...This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us with an oppositional world view —a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us...These statements identify marginality as much more than a site of deprivation; in fact, I was saying just the opposite, that it is a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.....It offers one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternative new worlds” (hooks 1984).

Working for Change

So our marginality can be to our advantage. It means that we can act as critics of the system and challenge the status quo. We may choose to work for change from within and we may even be able to take on a more radical approach to change or indeed critique radical change which can produce negative consequences.

I see my role as that of a radical political worker for change and transformation. I believe that, if the experiences of black students are to be different, then we have to use our positions as black academics to create change, despite the constraints although the experiences of doing so can be very wounding. A black woman professor, Patricia

Williams, in her collection of essays, 'The Alchemy of Race and Rights', writes eloquently of the way in which black female students and teachers engage in critical thinking and intellectual work which threatens the status quo and makes it difficult for us to receive the necessary support and affirmation. hooks (1994) argues that naming racism and sexism as combined ensures that colleagues with narrow perspectives will see us as intruders. Black people working or socialising in predominantly white settings, whose structures are grounded in racism and white male domination, risk being crushed if we dare to affirm blackness and a strong identity of black culture. If we insist in doing this then we do it at great risk.

In my early years in the university I experienced hitting my head against hard institutional structures, as I risked advancing notions of equalities and tried not to collude in reproducing inequality in my department. This was very wounding. I noticed that I kept repeating a cycle of putting energy into seeking new structures for change. I reacted to events by fighting at the front line. I had a direct, confrontational approach which was aimed at the power structures. My main mode of action was to be reactive, putting all my energies into fighting. Becoming aware of this pattern made me decide that I had to do something different. I kept working at one level only and found the experience frustrating and stressful and I had doubts about my ability to change structures from within.

My ambivalence led to self-doubt, which sometimes generated anger and left me debilitated. At times I blamed myself, and internalised that I was either doing something wrong or not articulating my views clearly enough. I took on some self-doubt. So much so that often on the car journey home I would check out with one of my female colleagues, her perception of me in meetings we both attended. I checked whether she understood what I had said and whether I had been too confrontational or too aggressive. She gave me honest and constructive feedback and at times we became engaged in conversations about some of my ideas as a black woman about teaching and learning and about supportive structures for learning, to which she brought a white Jewish woman perspective. I was inquiring into my behaviour in meetings so sought feedback from regular conversations with selected colleagues and friends about how they received my behaviour at meetings.

I began to notice how my own ways of speaking in departmental staff meetings and that of other women was different to our male colleagues. I began to realise that I shared being ignored and silenced with some other women. This, and other experiences,

reminded me that often when the radical voice speaks about domination we are speaking to those who dominate. Language is also a place of struggle and I struggled to find the 'right' language to challenge in a way that I could be heard. My language was one of resistance and I was also met with resistance in another language; a language that was one of domination, and sought to silence me.

I was left asking questions, at times, "Was I being 'too black', 'too political'?" I told myself that if, by introducing experiences of black students that were different from those constructed in academic writing, I was being "too black" or "too political" then I was comfortable with that. Unwilling to play the role of other, I tried desperately and painfully to create spaces within this culture of domination so as to be able to survive whole, with soul intact. I began to ask questions about my effectiveness. What happens to me when I react in this way? What happens to others when I react in this way? What do I do to myself, my well being? Do others listen, and if so, how? I realise, now, that by only responding reactively I may have solved some problems in the short term but my actions may have done nothing to alter the fundamental structure that caused the problem. To be most effective, I needed to consider a range of actions that moved beyond reactive through to creative. That sometimes means being less temperate.

The Cost of Working for Change

Some of us, who steer the Course towards change and who work for transformation, have found ourselves having to temper our radicalism. We are sometimes tempered by working within the confines of some oppressive organisations. Meyerson and Scully (1995) view tempered radicals as:

"People who work within mainstream organisations and professions and want also to transform them'....they have 'become tougher by being alternately heated up and cooled down' and they are angered by oppressive values and perceived lack of social justice...Tempered radicals are individuals who identify with and are committed to their organisations, and are also committed to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organisation. The ambivalent stance of these individuals creates a number of special challenges and opportunities" (p. 586).

Black scholars and critical thinkers (Bell 1990, hooks 1989, Collins 1986) have articulated the tensions and challenges of tempered radicals. They have given voice to the pressures that black professionals, especially women, face in conforming to professional standards and the dominant culture of white institutions as well as in living up to

expectations of black communities. They have argued that black academics, who have become tempered radicals, have experienced role conflict and role ambiguity which some cases produces stress and burn out. We become frustrated with the rate of change being so slow and some may give up on the possibility of ever affecting change.

But change might come in different ways and by taking small steps. Meyerson and Scully (1995) remind us that we can create change in two ways, “Through incremental, semi-strategic reforms and through spontaneous, sometimes unremarkable, expressions of authenticity that implicitly drive or even constitute change” (p.594).

They suggest two change -oriented strategies – small wins and local, spontaneous, authentic action. Two other strategies they suggest are language styles and affiliations. They recommend using insider language to legitimate a change programme because, at a deep level, insider language can be used to challenge the assumptions and values of the organisation. Some change agents, in order to gain legitimacy in the system, have learnt to speak the language of the insiders. They stress that language has the ‘capacity to rule out other forms of talk, thought and identity’. They also emphasis the importance of maintaining links with individuals, communities, or groups outside of their organisations. These outside affiliations can act as sources of information and support. So bearing these strategies in mind, what model of change could black academics adopt?

Advocating a model of change – incorporating a critical educative approach

We need a practical model of change which is linked to efforts to transform structures. Change is not just something an individual can do. It requires our collective responsibility to educate for critical consciousness. We also need to be engaged in ongoing, critical self-reflection, in changing our words and our deeds. In some ways it is our collective responsibility. It is not something that black academics can do in isolation; white people, showing willingness and commitment, can also play their part.

Black academics should make as many claims about our scholarship as white people do. This means writing papers, addressing conferences, reviewing articles, and, at times, not being available to perform the care-giving tasks which are expected of us. We should seek to influence the institution itself by playing a part in its organisation and structure. Universities have been slow in adopting equal opportunities policies. They are, therefore, unlikely to re-think higher education in terms of anti-racist practices unless there is a strong group committed to change working ‘on the inside’

What we will gain, in the end, is the opportunity to influence the next generation of students, to raise their consciousness about inequalities in society, to encourage them to confront their own assumptions and to challenge the racist and sexist nature of the organisations in which they are working. There is also the possibility of exciting in them the joy of the potential of change and the urgency of the need for that change.

Black academics are important role models and, those of us who wish to transform our consciousness, need to engage in an ongoing critical self-reflection in changing our worlds and actions. To get such a balance will require us to seek self-determination. This would require a process of decolonisation, which means choosing to examine ourselves critically, so as to divert us of internalised racism and sexism, and commit ourselves to politicisation. The process of politicisation and decolonisation requires critical literacy and educating ourselves by studying the work of progressive thinkers, black and non-black, whose teachings are about resistance.

Education programmes designed to meet the needs of people from poor working class backgrounds should find their way into the community. We need to challenge our thinking that, because some black people are poor, they are illiterate or unintelligent. We have to find ways that will allow black people, irrespective of economic status, to gain access to the knowledge and skills necessary. We need to take the initiative to call for and demand progressive anti-racist, anti-sexist education where it has been taken off the agenda by conservative institutions in higher education, as evidenced in, the policy document produced by CCETSW – Diploma in Social Work paper 31. We need to insist on its place in the classroom and integrate the teaching in our syllabus.

Collective efforts to change structures should to be the priority and go hand in hand with individual struggles to change consciousness. Black academics can challenge the academic structure with our presence as, in many cases, we have greater access to systems. It is important that, as black academics, we help create new structures for expression and develop progressive strategies for transforming existing structures. If we are committed to diverse black communities then we should be concerned with a critical pedagogy which seeks to address black audiences as well as other people. This commitment should be connected to an effort to promote collective black self-determination.

Black Self-determination

Link to: http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/a_bryan.html

At the heart of black self-determination is a political awareness that we should assume responsibility for constructively transforming our lives. An important goal of black self-determination is rooted in a conviction that it is possible for us, as black people, to create meaningful lives irrespective of our material conditions. Our mindset is more crucial than material privilege to achieving black self-determination. Black academics have a crucial role to play in helping with that educative process. An educative process that would help challenge and eradicate this internalised notion that the majority of black people live lives that are valueless because they lack material resources.

Black self-determination enables us to construct oppositional world-views, drawing on our history and the legacy of black resistance. Clearly, it is black people who have the most to gain from black self-determination so that many of the communities of resistance, including the classrooms and student communities, would be black even though they would not be based on a politics of exclusion.

It is difficult for black academics who believe in the need to develop forms of practice within the context of political action or within a radical education perspective. This, I believe, is because such educators like myself, while challenged by Friere's writings and those of black feminists', are working within 'stable' institutionalised education systems in which reform and not radical, political action is the way change is effected.

As a black academic, with my political commitment, I feel I need to guard against the danger of education becoming solely a political arena. I need to be mindful that too much emphasis on the political could lead to artificial polarisation and create unmanageable conflict. Political conflict can be healthy when managed well. However engaging in continuous conflictual situations, resulting from challenges to structures, has its personal cost for black academics. Nevertheless, challenges to traditional education and institutional learning need to continue. A challenge to adult educators, black and white, to examine their practice is important. As educators we should be challenged to commit ourselves to the liberation of the oppressed.

While black self-determination is a political process which first seeks first to engage the minds and hearts of black people, it can also embrace bridges across race. It also has to recognise the importance of black people learning from the wisdom of non-black people. The spirit of black self-determination includes diverse black experiences and diverse black communities.

If all of us, who are black academics, could agree upon our role and purpose and set out to pursue a common end, then we would still end up with very different results. This isn't because some are better at being black academic radicals than others, but simply that we each bring our own biographies into the academy and, like externally imposed constraints, these identities influence what we can and cannot achieve.

What therefore, is our role and purpose?

Concluding comments

Black academics play a central role in challenging eurocentric and male paradigms of knowledge. We are central to the creation of specialised thought, towards the development of theories that are liberating and reflective and which can aid the struggle in Britain against racism. We also play a big role in the re-articulation of our experiences and critical thinking about these experiences as an essential ingredient in empowering theories. This is because our concrete experiences as members of specific race, class and gender groups, as well as our concrete historical situations, necessarily play significant roles in our perspectives on the world.

Engaging with this research on the experiences of black professionals and black students, I have tried to play a part in the re-articulation of our experiences and sought to make a contribution to the positive development of some of the participants. In my role as an academic/researcher, I am involved in the construction of such specialised knowledge through teaching, research and publishing. In this position, I have the opportunity to challenge masculine and eurocentric discourse. I also have the opportunity to offer alternative visions of teaching/learning which are conducive to intellectual development, personal/professional development and social change. This is taking place in the context of what is increasingly becoming a tough and competitive institution in which certain masculine and eurocentric forms of knowledge and ways of communicating persist, but they no longer remain unchallenged.

From my experiences and the knowledge gained through my research, I would like to begin the conclusion of this thesis by stating that black professionals, including academics and black students, have a crucial role to play in the development of our

thought and knowledge, knowledge that could lead to transformation and change. I have three reasons for saying so: -

Firstly, our experiences as black people in Britain provide us with a unique position in respect of welfare agencies and academic institutions. It is more likely for black professionals and black students, as members of an oppressed group, to have critical insights into the condition of our own oppression than it is for those who live outside these structures. The importance of the leadership of black academics' in producing knowledge and theories does not mean that others cannot participate. It does not mean that the primary responsibility for defining one's own reality lies with the people who live this reality, who actually have these experiences.

Secondly, black academics can provide unique leadership for black students and other black professionals in empowerment and resistance. We play a major role in helping to make the connections between self-definition, empowerment and taking action on one's own behalf. We can help to assist black students and practitioners define their reality, tell their stories, name their history and shape their identity. The power of self-definition is a key to individual and group empowerment. Black professionals, academics and black students can assist in the development of an epistemology that allows for the power of self-definition to be developed. By 'self' I mean our own groups rather than 'other' groups, which might perpetuate black oppression.

Stressing the central importance of black professionals, academics and students to a black epistemology does not mean that all black professionals, academics and students exert full responsibility. Whilst being in white welfare organisations and academia generally provides the experiential base for a black consciousness, these same conditions suppress its articulation. Black professional consciousness is not acquired as a finished product but must continually develop in relation to changing conditions the consciousness of black professionals, academics and students emerges and is part of a self-conscious struggle to merge thought and action. It is also part of a self-definition. However, autonomy to develop a self-defined, independent analysis does not mean that black epistemology has relevance only for black people or that we must confine ourselves to analysing our own experiences

While theories and knowledge emanating from a black experience may originate with black professionals, academics and students, they cannot flourish in isolation from the

experiences and ideas of other groups. The dilemma is that we must place our own experiences and consciousness at the centre of any serious efforts to develop black epistemology whilst not becoming separatist and excluding with this knowledge. Black professionals, academics and students are central in producing black perspective thing and should remain central to its full articulation; however collaboration with other groups is also required.

Such collaboration requires dialogue in the first instance, between us and within the larger black communities so that we can find ways of handling difference, internal dissent and conflict. We could then use our position in organisations as “outsider-within” as a position of strength in building effective coalitions and stimulating dialogue. Our challenge then, as I discovered in my research inquiries, is developing dialogues based on a commitment to principled collaboration and authentic dialogue about our actual need for each other rather than on expediency.

From a solid base of strength we could deal with other kinds of people, a multiplicity of issues, and with difference. It is necessary, in order to further our development, to have dialogues with and to collaborate with a range of groups, each with their own distinctive sets of experiences, and specialised thought embedded in their experiences, of the larger system of political and intellectual discourse. The usefulness of collaboration with other groups, both as scholars and activists, offers us opportunities to develop new models for social change.