Black Women Managers and Participatory Action Research

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SUMMARY

This paper informs on the work of an action research group set up to investigate the status and experiences of black women managers within an organisational context in the UK. It relates how the group rapidly becomes a ‘participatory’ action research group when it is recognised that the black women managers share the common perception that theirs’ is an experience of oppression and potential powerlessness in their organisational setting. Empowerment results as common experiences shared are identified also the immediate and longer term steps being taken towards their ‘emancipation’.

KEYWORDS

Black Women; Empowerment; Managers; Organisations; Biculturality; Conscientization

INTRODUCTION

This action research project was born out of my need as a black woman to understand my status and experiences within my employing organisation in tandem with my MBA dissertation. Using an action research methodology allowed me to explore these experiences with other black women managers also working in organisations. Collaborative research allowed us to explore whether our experiences were isolated ones based on unique factors such as personal ineffectiveness, organisational context, for example, or were they the shared experiences of black women managers in organisations – a result of oppression. This paper presents the perspective of one group of black women managers seeking to better understand their experiences and to improve their personal and professional practice through collaborative research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A traditional Eurocentric (male dominated, white supremacist ideologue) approach to the curriculum in the business schools leaves many non-traditional (non-European/North American, female, non-white) students on the margin. They may be further marginalised by the requirement to apply culture-bound theories to their own experiences. While many will have a conceptual appreciation of the theories they will also have the ‘gut’ consciousness that such theories are not applicable to their practice. A search of the literature in the hope
of identifying theories and research about the black manager’s experience in the UK comes up nil, let alone the black woman manager’s. Different reasons are given for this paucity: difficulties in locating black women managers in local government (LGTB, 1990); a lack of UK statistics on non-white female managers and their experiences (Davidson and Cooper, 1992); a general deficit of studies relating to the black woman’s experience in the UK (Steady, 1981). If Spelman’s (1991) proposition is accepted alongside the cognizance of so many black women in the UK, that a woman’s woman-ness is rooted in her race and cultural experiences, then there must be issues for the black woman manager that are different to those of her white counterparts. The identifications of these issues were a major aim of this action research project.

THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

During the spring and summer of 1993 a lengthy search was carried out with black women managers being contacted and recruited from diverse public sector organisations (none from the private sector came forward), at varying levels of management with varying lengths of service, aspirations and qualifications. The response and interest expressed was enthusiastic curiosity in the first instance especially because black women (West Indian and African born also those born in the UK) in managerial positions are so few. The women had been inspired by the three main aims of the research: to improve personal and professional effectiveness through becoming reflective practitioners and to form a network of black women managers sharing, supporting and affirming each other.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

It had been the experience of many women that reflecting on their experiences in marginalised isolation had made them aware of their own powerlessness to effect change. Many were aware that their empowerment necessitated sharing with other black women to maintain psychological and emotional well-being. Also, the fact that they were in espoused ‘privileged’ positions in organisations tend to further marginalise them. It was recognised that this perceived powerlessness sometimes caused a ‘victim’ mind-set that did not acknowledge that this illusion was itself a product of the operation of powerful structures on the practice of isolated practitioners.

Participatory action research promotes the process of ‘conscientization’: ‘... the process in which people, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-historical reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality’ (Freire, 1970). The research had been explicitly conceived and partaken of with the purpose of understanding and overcoming felt dissatisfaction and an outcome was to be heightened critical consciousness. Features which made it typical of a participatory approach were that it named the people for whom it was directed, that is black women managers; it was intended to analyse their perceived disadvantage also offering enlightenment about what their real needs and wants were. It was intended that this enlightened self-knowledge should lead to effective ‘political’ action and would allow participants to take ‘informed’ action in their worlds. Dialogue was to be the medium for heightening the self-awareness of participants and their collective potential as the active agents of history. Participants shared control of the ‘content’ of the research procedure while the ‘process’ was interdependent with participants being simultaneously both participants and co-learners; an interactive process with dialogue as the base.
METHODOLOGY

The first stage consisted of negotiation over the work of the group, with an exploration of the areas of concern. Trust building, sharing and acknowledging different and shared experiences that had brought the group together, the formulation of ground-rules all took time. To further facilitate this aspect of the group’s development the strategy agreed was the use of co-counselling pairs (personal development through mutual support for individuals involved) while entering a process of structured reconnaissance – ‘where are we now?’. This structured reconnaissance was carried out using Bell’s Woman’s Life Context Model (1986) to delve into their experiences as black women in managerial and professional roles in the UK.

Structured reconnaissance would enable participants to evaluate their experiences by showing whether what has been achieved was above or below expectation also acting as a basis for correctly planning a course of action. Data gathered would form the basis for modifying individual and group strategies as intelligence was improved. Participants would also be given the chance to learn, to gather new general insights, for instance, regarding the strength and weakness of certain strategies, tactics or techniques of action. Reconnaissance was to be the first stage in the reflective cycle – plan-act-observe-reflect – towards improved personal and professional effectiveness.

FINDINGS: CONTENT

Experiences varied but in general the black women managers were having a difficult time in organisations managing other people’s responses to their blackness whilst also not achieving as they would have expected. Each black manager portrayed her blackness as an intrinsic part of her professional practice. It was perceived that both racism and sexism were working against black women. The mythical ‘strength’ of the black woman also needed to be questioned and understood in the context of stress and its effects on their health. Participants were aware of having developed defences along with other ‘baggage’ (i.e. internalised racism) which needed unloading so rehumanisation may begin. With these needs was a fundamental appreciation of the need for support and understanding. Group members were in no doubt that they were becoming involved in a political process that would necessarily question the status quo. Some recognised that they were walking a tightrope and that only as they adopted a mono-cultural (white) approach to their organisational existence, in other words deny significant portions of their black cultural heritage, could a successful career progression within an organisation be even seriously aspired to. Black women managers born outside the UK (but invariably educated here) felt that especially vulnerable were the British born blacks, socialised into a myth of meritocracy and educated into a system which carries racism at three different levels: individual cultural and institutional. Despite these women’s attempts at chameleon-like assimilation the white mainstream still rejects black people in positions of authority. The group considered that the data derived from this research could be usefully made into case studies and biographies for the benefit of others.

It was agreed that the action research methodology would allow black women to share experiences, explore their ‘worlds’ and carry out critical investigation identifying strategies for the future. Generally, it was felt that black women professionals needed such a group where their interests were at the centre of the groups focus rather than being marginalised and
made to be invisible when discussing ‘women’ (Spelman, 1991). A definite interest was also expressed in the academic research aspect of the project: “a voice at last”. An opportunity for black women to do away with ‘silence’ and to articulate their unique experiences in the UK rather than having to look to the USA for experiences and models developed.

While their experiences were those of having a ‘token’ status – this status was deemed unacceptable. While acknowledging the value of black support structures in organisations it was also conceded that taking part in black support groups within organisations was tantamount to giving up promotional prospects. The fear of collusion and formation of cliques whenever white managers saw two or more blacks getting together was commonly recognised. The participants understand that the conscientization process of learning and developing critical consciousness (hook, 1989) had become an absolute imperative. The other side of the coin for these black women managers was that they were also the mothers and nurturers of the next generation. They had a responsibility to that generation. Emigrating ‘back home’ to the West Indies/Africa would not solve the problem for their children. They needed to accept their status as Afro-Britons (products of the two cultures) and the fact they were here to stay. The women agreed that the time had arrived to end the conspiracy of silence and stake their claims as equal citizens and employees.

FINDINGS: PROCESS

The emphasis on confidentiality for the group process is an indication of the vulnerability black women managers have experienced over time. Two factors that affected the work and progress will be noted here: First, the fact that most of the participants were, in the main, only able to meet outside work hours and not in the work environment (feeling that employers would not necessarily give permission) made the setting up of meetings problematic. Secondly, different levels of management/status was represented in the group and this proved to be burdensome, because of the disparate needs that participants had brought with them to the research,. Levels of consciousness varied and generally the higher the level achieved the stronger was the ‘what is in this for me’ factor.

Both factors strongly influenced the life of the group being diminished. Expected group processes were evident in terms of the stages of group development. Throughout the life of the group different agendas manifested themselves and highlighted the concept of a ‘multiverse’ as participants strove to meet their differing needs.

EMERGING STRATEGIES

Emerging strategies included the need for black women managers to anchor their consciousness of colour in a living cultural tradition; to take up a continuous and comprehensive commitment to fighting racism (the development of critical consciousness would underpin this); the development of networks both inside and outside organisations was advocated as a strategy to deal with working in isolation; the development of black women’s mentoring programmes within and across organisations; make the decision to ‘come out’ and articulate their experiences thus finding a voice for themselves; continue to develop a professional identity that while accommodating British values still relates to their own social status also that of other black people in the organisation and society; be willing to become change-agents (in considering the wider implications of management practices for the society and for black people within the society).
BICULTURAL COMPETENCE: AN UNDERLYING THEME

Throughout the research it became evident that there were certain characteristics that identified the black professional person in the UK (and elsewhere) all of which were rooted in the fact that they have had to adopt Eurocentric ways of being. This adoption recognises that there is in existence a culture of power that must be imitated if they are to achieve in the society. While UK society demands obeisance to the idea of its culture many black people will espouse biculturality. It is this espoused biculturality that, it is being postulated, needs to be further understood.

Being bicultural implied the ability to move freely and with ease between two cultures. Bicultural competence in the full sense of the work, therefore, cannot be fully realisable if there is a dominant culture that views the minority culture as inferior. Therefore, claims of bicultural ‘competence’ need to be considered as to their authenticity. What happens when one’s culture (and consequently the individual) is viewed as inferior and thus not valued? Can black people in this position be truly bicultural? It is a fact that black people in the UK are not allowed free movement and opportunity into the dominant culture. Possibly the term is used loosely with an inherent acknowledgement by black people of its incompleteness when applied to the reality of their experiences. It should also be noted that there is a danger of self-deception for the few that have achieved ‘success’ and believe that they are biculturally competent but who have in fact had to take on wholesale the values and beliefs of the dominant culture to achieve.

Truly biculturally competent individuals will have an understanding of what is being taken on, or conversely, what is being given up as they seek to achieve. Black managers in organisations need to address this issue of biculturality: is it possible to be truly bicultural without being grounded in the culture with which an individual has a common racial heritage? Evidence shows the answer to be no! Only with the above grounding can an individual even hope to become bicultural with their integrity intact having made informed choices.

Applying the concept of ‘biculturality’ to Howell’s (1982) framework for awareness and competence, which is presented as a four-stage process, demonstrates how an individual may progress from a position of unconscious bicultural incompetence through conscious bicultural incompetence to conscious bicultural competence as action is taken culminating in unconscious bicultural competence as the process of conscientization takes place and learning is internalised. This process is being advocated as essential for black managers in order for their full potential to be attained while maintaining their integrity as black people.

CONCLUSIONS

This research became both ‘emancipatory’ and ‘participatory’ in that it was explicitly committed to exploring the felt dissatisfactions of the participants; critiquing the status quo and building a more just society through the empowerment of participants, who were involved in selecting both the ‘contents’ of the research while also involving themselves in learning from the individual and group ‘processes’. Very important was the process of ‘conscientization’ and the understanding and acceptance that black people are not born into an awareness of blackness and racism simply because of their colour but that ‘blackness’ is
a state of mind and that racism is a social construction both of which they have a responsibility to educate themselves about for critical consciousness.

REFERENCES


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