

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Equal opportunities but unequal mentoring? The perceptions of mentoring by Black and minority ethnic academics in the UK university sector

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Abstract

Official statistics on the labour market position of Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups in academic institutions reveal that there are disparities in both their representation and in their promotion to higher levels. However, while the importance of mentoring has been acknowledged, few studies have explored the role of this importance organizational intervention in understanding the adverse employment outcomes of BME academics. This article documents, explores, and analyses the perceptions, reflections, and interpretations that BME academics attribute to their understanding of the role of mentoring in their career journeys, interactions, and experiences. The findings suggest that BME academics experienced widespread dissatisfaction of mentoring which many attributed to the unfavourable context in which university interventions such as mentoring is implemented as well as the inauthenticity of white mentors in their interactions with BME academics. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings for researchers and practitioners.

KEYWORDS

academic mentoring, Black and minority ethnic employment, BME academics, effective mentoring, mentoring, university mentoring

Abbreviations: BME, Black and minority ethnic; COVID-19, Coronavirus Disease 2019; REF, Research Excellence Framework; UK, United Kingdom.

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Practitioners notes

What is currently known about the subject matter

- In the UK, one in nine white academics is a full professor while only one in 15 Asians and one in 33 black scholars have professorial status.
- Researchers argue that an understanding of the role of organizational interventions such as mentoring in contributing to the outcomes that are reported is required.
- There is an overall shortage of studies into academic mentoring in general and in relation to UK Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups in particular.

What this paper adds:

- This study explores and analyses the perceptions of academic mentoring through assessing BME informants' interpretations of the ways the mentoring process in their institutions impact on their experiences of work and their career progression.
- The study reports evidence of poor mentoring practice which participants linked to their ethnicity.
- Existing mentoring was perceived as a crude attempt at control, overly target-focussed, with closed/scared mentors over-keen on creating clones of themselves in ways that exclude BME academics.
- Effective mentoring was viewed as rare involving considerable mentee effort, with costs accruing to the mentee highlighting the paucity of effective support for BME academics.

Finally, the findings of this study has implications for practitioners:

- The analysis provides a timely and pertinent example of how seemingly progressive organizational practice can generate and perpetuation racial disadvantage.
- The lived experience of mentored BME academics is negative with many participants believing that their dissimilarity to their mentors on the salient demographic characteristic of race impacts negatively on their career prospects.
- A key implication is the need for institutions to recognise the systemic and racialised disadvantages of BME academics and to scrutinise their systems, policies, processes, and practices to ensure that they remove or change them
- Wider implications centre on the need for all those involved in policy making or implementation in academic institutions to understand the role of race and racialisation in influencing organizational outcomes and to receive training on anti-racism.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The diversity and inclusion record of UK universities has attracted widespread scrutiny from several quarters (e.g., Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; EHRC, 2019; Williams et al., 2019). While there are variations between and within groups, statistical evidence suggests that the overall outcomes on representation are poor for academics from Black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds. Indeed, while 14% of the UK population are BME, their proportion in academic careers has remained low, with recent data showing that 7.2% of academic staff in higher education are from UK BME backgrounds (see HESA, 2020).

While existing data underscore the importance of improving access to employment in addressing the under-representation of BME groups in academia, we argue that a fuller account of the disparities reported above is likely to be garnered by combining representation data with analysis of intra-organizational processes to uncover how these impact on BME pipelines (see also Ogbonna, 2019). In this regard, understanding the

upward trajectories of success is crucial to framing the outcomes that are reported in official statistics. To put this in context, a recent analysis concluded that one in nine white academics achieved professorial status in UK higher education institutions in comparison with one in 15 Asian academics and one in 33 black academics (see UCU, 2019).

However, although existing outcomes underline the criticality of intra-organizational interventions such as mentoring to promote BME career success, they also suggest that potential institutional constraints may be complicating these dynamics. Two such constraints are particularly relevant to this study. The first is that the low number of senior BME academics indicates that early career BME staff may encounter difficulties in terms of finding suitable role models and in relation to relying on mentoring to improve their career opportunities. Such difficulties arise because research suggests that being different on the salient demographic characteristic of race introduces additional relational challenges (see Avery et al., 2008; Tsui et al., 1992) which may impact profoundly on the outcomes of interventions such as mentoring.

The second constraint is linked to the context in which race policies are made and implemented in academic institutions and the ways in which this context may impact on the efficacy of organizational interventions for different racial and ethnic groups. Specifically, many scholars have argued that university policies are made within normative environments that are not inclusive. They contend that such policies commonly reinforce the legitimacy of norms, values, and practices that are presented as neutral, but which confer and institutionalise advantages to white faculty (see Ahmet, 2021; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020).

Linked to the above is that, while the important role of mentoring in career success has been acknowledged (e.g. Eby et al., 2008; McGregor-Smith, 2017; Scandura, 1992), there remains a shortage of research into race and mentoring. This is especially pertinent in relation to whether (and how) mentoring can be the key to unlocking the career potential of those from racially discriminated communities. Indeed, while previous studies conclude with calls for additional investigations into the less favourable treatment of BME groups in mentoring and other organizational processes (see Ogbonna, 2019; Wanberg et al., 2003), there remains a disappointing number of critical inquiries into race and this important organizational intervention. This shortage of research is evident in academic institutions (see Muller et al., 2012), and is particularly marked in the UK academic context where there is a dearth of research into race and mentoring (see also Bhopal, 2020).

This article documents, explores, and analyses the perceptions, reflections, and interpretations that BME academics attribute to their understanding of the role of mentoring in their career journeys, interactions, and experiences. We draw from the literature on mentoring and race discrimination to address a number of research questions in relation to how BME academics perceive the effectiveness of the mentoring they receive at their institutions; how they perceive the nature of organizational policies and responses in contributing to their experiences, and how they rationalise their experiences. The study is significant for several reasons. First, we contribute insights into the lived experiences of mentoring by BME academics across the academic career hierarchy, from early career staff to senior academics. Second, we generate empirical insights into perceptions of race discrimination in mentoring and this helped us to argue for an extension of understanding of workplace race discrimination. Third, we provide evidence to argue that classifications of perceptions of mentoring as good or bad may conceal a range of behaviours and motives and may not be appropriate in relation to cross-race mentoring relationships. Fourth, we contribute data-grounded findings into race and context unfavourability in mentoring and we show how the organizational context can, through façades of seemingly progressive practices, disturbingly contribute to racial disadvantage.

The article begins with an overview of the literature on mentoring with particular focus on race and mentoring in academia. This review highlights the contributions of researchers who have discussed the context in which race policies are made in UK academic institutions. This is followed by a presentation of the methods through which data were gathered and analysed. The findings of the study are then presented, with the article culminating in a discussion of the contributions and implications of the study.

2 | BME ACADEMICS AND MENTORING IN THE ACADEMY

Mentoring research has a long history in the fields of organization studies, psychology, sociology, and education. Scholars in these fields have provided wide-ranging reviews which have helped to advance many themes of research (e.g. Eby et al., 2000; Kram, 1985; Wanberg et al., 2003). However, it is beyond the scope of this article to provide extensive reviews of these themes; instead, our review is necessarily parsimonious and will draw from general mentoring research, with emphasis on contributions relating to racial diversity, with particular focus on academic institutions.

The approach to mentoring adopted here is derived from Blackwell (1989) who views this activity broadly to include the counselling, guidance, and the socialisation of career aspirants. Although mentoring can be a group-based activity, it is generally viewed as a dyadic relationship between two parties. Kram (1985) argues that such activities are commonly designed to fulfil career and prosocial function. The perceived importance of mentoring in organisations is such that scholars have positioned it as potentially the most important work relationship that two individuals can have, and one with the capacity to be particularly influential in establishing deep emotional connection (see Fowler & O'Gorman, 2005; Wanberg et al., 2003). While individual mentoring experiences will depend on the idiosyncratic particulars of the mentoring context, researchers have followed the pioneering work of Kram (1985) in highlighting the factors which are commonly associated with positive (good) and negative (bad) mentoring. Career aspirants typically view positive mentoring as including behaviours such as supporting, coaching, sponsoring, protecting, providing advice, and generally helping them to improve their visibility and exposure in ways that enhance their job satisfaction and career progression (see Eby et al., 2000). In contrast, negative mentoring is viewed as behaviours which impact negatively on satisfaction and career progression through dysfunctional actions such as bullying, sabotage, deception, harassment, and general unfair treatment (see Eby, 2007; Scandura, 1998). Some researchers have suggested that effective mentoring goes beyond helping the mentee to navigate the demands of the job, to providing initiation and insights into the norms that characterise success in a given profession, as well as those that are necessary for success in particular organisations (see Byars-Winston et al., 2015; Eby et al., 2008).

Scholars have also drawn from leadership theory to conceptualise mentoring as a process which can be transactional (based on instrumentalism) or transformational in ways that incorporate relational approaches that encourage conditions in which mentees flourish (see Scandura & Williams, 2004). Others have alluded to the important role of commitment in mentoring relationships (see Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005). A key argument is that relationships in which the commitment of the mentees and mentors are equally high commonly report higher levels of success (see Poteat et al., 2009). However, given the time and personal commitment that are typically required to achieve transformational mentoring, it is likely that the propensity of individual mentors to engage in such mentoring will be influenced by a variety of factors. Key amongst these factors is that which is addressed in this study: the impact of race on the dynamics of mentoring. Exploring the role of race in mentoring is important because research into inter-personal behaviours and group dynamics suggest that individuals are more likely to associate with and support people who are like themselves, a phenomenon which is commonly referred to as 'similarity attraction' (see Byrne, 1971) or 'prosocial reproduction' (see Kanter, 1977). Linked to this are findings which indicate that a major source of satisfaction (and thus dissatisfaction) in mentoring relationships is the degree of fit between the values of mentors and mentees (see Allen & Eby, 2003). These suggest that cross-race mentoring relationships are fraught with additional challenges than same race relationships. Indeed, Scandura (1998) encourages scholars to investigate the role of cross-race relationships in mentoring, and Wanberg et al. (2003) highlights the need for additional research into race and mentoring.

Scholars have responded to the calls highlighted above by exploring the implications of race in mentoring. For example, researchers have argued that BME mentees are less likely to obtain effective mentoring (see Espino & Zambrana, 2019). Bhopal's (2016) research suggests that mentoring works differently for BME groups and some scholars have gone as far as arguing that many mentoring relationships are characterised by entrenched racial inequalities (see Byars-Winston et al., 2015, 2020). Other researchers have explored the difficulties that people from BME backgrounds have in accessing mentors, and while there are a few exceptions (e.g., Blake-Beard, 1999), many

contributions in this area indicate that mentoring is more likely to be effective where parties are alike in racial and ethnic backgrounds. Specifically, Ortiz-Walters and Gilson (2005) concluded that mentees who are similar in racial/ethnic origin to their mentors are more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction because such mentees commonly derive enhanced psychological satisfaction and instrumental support from the relationships (see also Zambrana et al., 2015).

However, much emerging research on race and academic mentoring relationships have focussed on the USA, where there is a different history of racism and inter-racial dynamics. There has been a surprising lack of research contributions into race and mentoring in the UK academic context. An exception is the recent work by Bhopal (2020) which examined the mentoring of senior BME academics and concluded that there was a gap between idealised position of management on mentoring and realities experienced by senior BME academics. Indeed, the senior BME academics that Bhopal (2020) studied largely overcame the systemic barriers against them to achieve career success rather than relying on support from their respective institutions.

To develop a fuller understanding of race and academic mentoring in the UK context, it is useful to explore the wider environment in which academic policies are made. A review finds that while the organization, management, and employment academics are relatively silent on these issues, there is growing research that points to the prevalence of institutional racism that is perpetuated through 'colour-blind' approaches in managing academic institutions in education, psychology, and sociology. The overriding conclusion of many of these studies is that the cultures, systems, and processes of academic institutions, many of which were historically non-inclusive of ethnic minorities, have been developed and perpetuated in ways that reinforce the status quo (see Ahmet, 2021; Murji & Solomos, 2015). The emergent practices have become taken-for-granted, such that policy makers are oblivious to the pernicious racism of such contexts (e.g. Joseph-Salisbury, 2019; Tate & Bagguley, 2017). One example of the entrenched nature of this culture can be seen in the reactions of universities to a recent report on racism (see EHRC, 2019). While the representative of university employers (Universities UK) acknowledged the charge of institutional racism and urged fellow heads to take this seriously (see The Guardian, 2021), few institutions have similarly acknowledged the prevalence of racism. Instead, race remains a sensitive topic and a source of discomfort which universities prefer to ignore (see Ahmet, 2021). Thus, scholars have labelled the approach of UK university managers as maintaining 'colour-blindness' wherein race is not considered as a factor that influences outcomes (see Bhopal, 2019; Tate & Bagguley, 2017).

Researchers have argued that, by not accounting for the impact of race in decision-making, universities are denying the lived experiences of BME academics which are marred by systemic racism. For example, studies have found that BME academics commonly have higher teaching loads than their white counterparts (see Bhopal, 2016). It is also argued that BME academics are more likely to lack access to networks that facilitate career success (see Ahmed, 2012), and the low number of senior BME academics acts as a disincentive to apply for promotion (see Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020), with the experiences of ethnic minority women across the academy being particularly bleak (see Gabriel, 2017). In these regards, there is a consistent theme of lack of inclusion that runs through many discussions of BMEs in the academy, with some scholars arguing that the treatment of BME academics suggests that they are viewed as not belonging in the academy (see Joseph-Salisbury, 2019).

The implications of the forgoing discussion on the emotional well-being of BME academics has also been discussed (e.g. Arday, 2022; Gabriel, 2017). Indeed, the cumulative stresses of racism has been presented as one reason why BME academics are more likely to seek employment outside the UK (see Bhopal et al., 2016). Similarly, research emerging from wider studies of racism link repeated exposure to racism and the failure to address it to illnesses such as hypertension, depression, and even premature death (see Arday, 2022; Noh et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2019).

Overall, our brief review suggests that there remains limited insights into race and mentoring. To develop additional understanding of mentoring as an organizational intervention in universities, it is necessary to explore how it works for BME individuals across the academic hierarchy, from early career staff to more experienced academics.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

We adopted an exploratory research design as our intention was focussed on exploring and analysing the perceptions, reflections, and interpretations that BME academics attribute to their understanding of the role of mentoring in their career journeys, interactions, and experiences. Accordingly, we deemed qualitative methods using a grounded approach, in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews, the most appropriate means of data collection (see Miller & Glassner, 1997).

Data were collected in 2019 before COVID-19 and the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 which significantly increased the profile of racial and ethnic inequalities. Prior to data collection, we applied and obtained ethical clearing for our research. We define academic as (loosely) any individual employed by a university whose primary role is either teaching or research (or both).

In this paper we focus on 37 in-depth interviews with BME academics in 9 UK-based, pre-1992 public universities. Universities were selected randomly, and participants selected via a random selection of suitable (see below) potential BME participants. In total, 2 readers were interviewed, 18 mid-ranking (senior lecturers or equivalent) and 17 early career academics. Criteria for participation included self-identification as BME, having at least 3 years' experience of full-time employment in a predominately research and/or teaching role at a UK university within the last 4 years. The median of past employing institutions was three, with one senior academic having worked in 13 different institutions. All participants in this study self-identified as BME, worked in a UK-based public university, the majority of participants self-identified as male (19), ages ranged from 27 to 61, most had completed their most recent degree in the UK (27), and average tenure at their current university was just over 4 years, while average time in post was slightly longer at 6 years (Table 1).

Most interviews lasted around 1 h (the shortest interview ending after 49 min and the longest after 113 min). All interviews were conducted face-to-face and predominately in private offices. Our focus was on formal mentoring programmes although some participants discussed informal mentoring (often in terms of personal friendships/associations). While a range of mentoring schemes were found each formal scheme included the requirement of each academic to be allocated mentor on appointment, the selection of a mentor by a superordinate, a written mentoring policy documents on appointment (although only six mentees were able to find the document), the compulsory annual creation of a self-reflective document by the mentee, compulsory formal face-to-face meetings at least once a year, the formal acceptance of a comment/appraisal of the self-reflective document by the mentor, and the lodging of the document with some body. All such schemes/systems are positioned by the institutions as benign in the way they applied to all staff. No evidence was found of a BME-specific scheme or adjustments made to reflect the specific concerns of BME staff. Interestingly, while mentoring documents commonly stated that mentees could request a different mentor, only 10 mentees were aware of this and all 10 believed that such requests would be career damaging. While mentor training was available at all universities, only two mentees believed that their mentors had such training. None of the mentees interviewed could recall being offered training in receiving mentoring. Three mentors had undertaken elective training in mentoring (each over 5 years earlier).

The interviews were semi-structured with an evolving interview protocol that developed through data collection/analysis to incorporate interesting lines of enquiry (see Arsel, 2017). Consequently, whilst our initial interview protocol was standardized, as the data collection process progressed and tentative categories emerged, we refined

TABLE 1 Profile of participants

	Male	Female
Professor	-	-
Reader	1	1
Senior lecturer	11	7
Lecturer	7	10

our protocols to reflect emerging themes (focussing on perceptions and interpretations). For example, a sample question 'tell me about your first mentoring meeting' evolved to 'can you tell me about how you first heard that X was going to be your mentor—who told you, where, when, how, and what did you do/feel'? All interviews were recorded and transcribed to capture the nuances of the perceptions and interpretations of the participants. To facilitate analysis, we adopted a procedure that required the analysis both during and post data collection. This procedure both informed and enriched subsequent data collection.

Following Strauss and Corbin (1998), we employed their three types of coding to analyse our data and, in the main, adhered to their recommendations. Coding was done manually as the research team deemed that in this study such an approach could facilitate a deeper understanding of the data than software-based programmes. The Strauss and Corbin (1998) protocols generated the key themes and the categories. To identify and discover the properties and dimensions of key concepts, we used 'open' coding. Thereafter, we employed 'axial' coding to organise and connect data to core categories at both the properties and dimensions. Here we used the Strauss and Corbin (1998) six subcategories (of phenomenon, causal causation, strategies, consequences, context, and intervening condition) to scrutinise our data into themes (for example 'mentoring cost'). Thereafter, we utilised 'selective' coding where we scrutinised our data to refine and then to integrate both insights and theories (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Importantly, although we adopted three types of coding, this procedure involved iteration and reiteration until we were satisfied that we had an adequate understanding of coding themes and their contextual (and otherwise) relationships (Corley & Gioia, 2004).

Throughout data collection/analysis, we endeavoured to enhance the validity of our findings. For example, a potential source of bias was acknowledged to be the perceived ethnicity, age, and gender of the interviewers whose perceived appearances and behaviours could bias responses. The authors are BME and white with a long history of research partnership. While being especially sensitive to concerns of BME academics, the authors worked hard to put the participants at ease during the interviews. Nonetheless, some of the strongest sentiments were shared with the BME author. Listening to the narratives often reminded him of some of his own negative experiences and while he sometimes struggled with this, he was able to maintain as objective a stance as possible to allow the participants to express their views in their own ways. We endeavoured to minimise the impact of bias via a variety of means. As our study is interpretative in nature, we embraced Lincoln and Guba's (1985) critical criteria for assessing the acceptability, credibility, and overall trustworthiness of our data. Accordingly, we employed tactics to enhance the dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability of our analyses (collectively often termed 'trustworthiness' - see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These included systematically recording interviews and observational data, the use of a consistent but emerging interview schedule, using a structured data analysis approach, and adopting a 'concurrent-dual' system of analysis. Internal veracity checks included the critical review of our procedures and outcomes by two independent researchers. External veracity checking involved five ex post interviews with academics not included in data collection who undertook a similar review of procedures, findings, and conclusions. The outcomes of such checks were used as means of gauging and curbing tentative or initial conclusions that were not wholly supported and thus enhancing both the trustworthiness and theoretical generalisability of our conclusions.

With the permission of the participants, gender, job titles, experience, and other details have been included for contextual understanding (some details have been disguised to protect the identity of participants—including department details, university names, and locations).

4 | FINDINGS

Analysis of the data from this sample of interviews with UK university faculty led to the emergence of five main themes which relate to the perceptions, reflections, and interpretations of university mentoring by BME staff. These are discussed below.

4.1 | Mentors are target-focused

The first theme focuses on how BME mentees perceived existing mentoring systems, mentors, the motivations of such mentors, and institutional understanding and practise of mentoring. These interpretations are synthesised in BME mentees' criticism of their institutions and mentors as overly concerned with (most often research output) targets with institutional focuses that undermine the concerns of individuals and groups. This focus was widely-viewed as reflecting the poor understanding of mentoring and the rigid imposition of universal (institutionally-endorsed) targets or the over-concentration of 'mentoring' on measurable, quantifiable objective settings (SMART—specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound). Such 'mentoring-by-objectives' was often disparaged by mentees:

Listen, I know it can work [pause] in theory. The hard reality is in today's world; mentors just hand out School REF targets, hand out journal rankings, and list all the things they want you to do. Ask them 'how' and you get blank looks and hard stares! Say, 'but there are no black professors here' and they close down—you can see it in their eyes. The shutters come down. [BME, Female, Mentee, Senior Lecturer, 36, 5 years in current post]

As such, BME mentees conclude that most mentors, while adhering to university procedures, fail adequately to understand both the overall nature of mentoring but also the complexities faced by BME mentees, and so blindly use a 'tick-box' approach:

Okay! I know. 'CABS [Chartered Association of Business School ranking of 1* (lowest) to 4* (highest) list of journals] rank three stars and four stars?' Tick! 'Impact stuff by the shed load?' Tick! 'Teaching scores of four?' Tick! 'Now you've given me the bloody shopping list of what the Department wants so the Head can justify his salary, exactly how do I get those three and four stars?' How do I 'develop link with my academy'? Who is 'my academy'? Do they know? 'Cos I don't? It is all about what they want—lists of scores and points. Bugger all about how and a whopping great diddly squat on how they'll actually help. [BME, Male, Mentee, Lecturer, 30, 2 years in current post]

Participants also spoke of the ways in which the formalised systems were supplanted by informal practices and how they did not always understand the 'rules' of these informal approaches. For example,;

Although they have all the formal processes, mentoring is still a case of who you know. Our white colleagues understand these informal processes and they can still get the support they need when formal mentoring doesn't work for them. [BME, Female, Mentee, Lecturer, 29, 3 in current post]

4.2 | Mentors only permit clones to join networks

Where BME faculty discussed their experiences of mentoring systems where efforts were made to guide, many mentors were found to be tunnel-visioned in their approach. Mentees noted that mentors tended to attribute their own success to their own approach while assuming that such an approach was universally applicable. In some respects, this reflects a colour-blind approach wherein race is not considered in decision-making (see Joseph-Salisbury, 2019; Tate & Bagguley, 2017) and is one which the participants viewed as damaging. As one argues:

They genuinely believe that their success is a product of their individual effort alone...they fail to consider that they have institutional acceptance, their faces fit, and they don't have to waste a vast amount of time trying to negotiate this acceptance...It is taken for granted and all they have to worry

about is the work, no extra baggage...[BME, Male, Mentee, Senior Lecturer, 40, 3 years in current post].

Another participant provides an example of how the lack of understanding of the specific problems of BME mentees result in their white mentors extending their advice beyond standard exhortations to 'work hard' to personal reflections and even what some BME mentees viewed as western/white preferences:

My mentor wants me to behave in certain ways at conferences and academic events...To do what he calls 'active networking' ... engage in irrelevant small talks with people I know simply don't give a toss about me and with people who just want to fill their tummies with tons of alcohol. He says it's the best way to immerse oneself in the academy, but this is just not me. Alcohol is forbidden in my religion! [BME, Male, Mentee, Lecturer, 28, 2 years in current post]

Analysis found BME mentees commonly employ a variety of terms and labels to refer to mentoring-by-cloning (including coteries, twinning, copies, replicas, mini-me's). Such mentoring approaches are almost universally perceived to be initiated by a senior, experienced, white faculty member, directed towards white, male, research-oriented, early-career academics. Jahan comments:

Do you know Professor Jones [a pseudonym]? Have you seen him? He can't go anywhere without a little cadre of mini-Joneses! Yes sir! No Sir! They even dress like him! What is it? They told me, that's what I should, do! "He's in your field—you should work with him—he's a great role model for you—such a mentor? He's really brought on so many people!" Yep. All pretty, white, boys who don't mind kissing Jonesy's considerable, white butt. [BME, Male, Mentee, Lecturer, 30, 2 years in current post]

Somewhat in keeping with the similarity attraction paradigm (see Byrne, 1971), many BME academics claim that senior (typically white) faculty favour white academics and/or exclude BME academics from opportunities to join the network/cadre (examples including, not being invited on research projects, grant applications, or module/programme teams, despite being better qualified than their white colleagues). The increased likelihood of value fit in such relationships (see Allen & Eby, 2003) is such that favoured faculty were portrayed as clones and were widely viewed as deliberately emulating their particular 'Jones' in return for network access, guidance, and help.

In this regard, BME mentees commonly argue that the mentoring process exposes an irony which is that simply conducting high quality research or delivering good teaching is insufficient for career success. Mentees reason that they are also pressured by mentors to replicate the dress, mannerisms, informal behaviours, and communication styles of their white mentors in ways that may present challenges to those that are dissimilar, especially on the salient characteristic of race. This also highlights a key barrier to BME career progression. That is, academic networks are key to institutional and trans-institutional advancement but through non-clone exclusion, BME mentees are excluded because of activities which they are not part of (e.g., closed social networks) or via declining to mimic behaviours that others (white mentors) consider appropriate (e.g., drinking alcohol). Thus, while all career aspirants must navigate the processes associated with mentoring, BME candidates face additional obstacles which are neither acknowledged nor addressed by institutions.

4.3 | White mentors are perceived as scared/closed

All the BME academics interviewed either had a white formal mentor or had had a white mentor in the recent past. As such, BME academics felt able to reflect on their interpretations of white mentors. Various, BME academics describe the key characteristics of their white mentors as 'guarded', 'scared', 'terrified', 'nervous', and 'uneasy'. This

reflects the prevailing frustration of BME faculty that mentors are unwilling to be candid with their mentoring to BME faculty. One comments:

I'm not criticizing all white mentors. I know it is hard sometimes, but you just end up wanting to scream 'so what am I blinking doing wrong!' Stop babbling away about 'this is all very positive' and just tell me! [Whispered shouting] "What do I need to do?" They are either scared to tell us or they don't want to open the doors to an Asian Geordie woman [details changed for reasons of confidentiality]. [BME, Female, Mentee, Lecturer, 37, 9 years in current post]

Similarly, a male academic bemoans the façade of 'positivity' as a guise to avoid active engagement and genuine mentoring:

It's all so PC it is stupid! All 'focus on your strengths' and 'how can we support you'. What is needed is what I'm doing wrong not what I'm doing right!!! [BME, Male, Mentee, Senior Lecturer, 41, 7 years in current post]

This led many BME mentees to suggest that white mentors are uncomfortable with BME mentees and seem unable to engage with BME colleagues in the same way as white mentees. However, interestingly, this uncomfortable engagement was not always borne out of malicious intent or desire to do harm on the part of mentors but was viewed by some as a result of 'not knowing' how to respond to people from different ethnicity, and of trying to avoid being labelled racist. For example:

He's not a bad man. In fact, he's one of the good ones. He probably wants to help but you can see just how scared he is to say the wrong thing.... He's already a middle-aged, middle-class man. He knows he's privileged, he's simply terrified that he'll get called out as the epitome of white privilege. [BME, Male Mentee, Senior Lecturer, 38, 5 years in current post]

Notwithstanding the motives for the behaviour, the outcome is the same for the mentees at the receiving end who feel that they are not receiving the appropriate support. Lydia concludes:

I truly think my mentor is scared of me. He avoids my eye in the cafeteria, seems to walk the other way when he sees me—polite but distant. I think he doesn't have a clue and is terrified that I'm going to actually mention being black. In one way it's funny. In another it makes me want to cry. I just want some guidance about research but because I'm not the same ethnicity as him, he's scared that I'll call him a racist or something. [BME, Female, Mentee, Senior Lecturer, 48, 3 years in current post]

While BME mentees felt confident in their descriptions of white mentors of (at least, partly) scared of them, the implications of such perceptions for BME were emotionally damaging (see Arday, 2022), in ways that some participants indicated, impacted negatively on their feelings of belongingness (see Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). Mentees described their working lives as tainted by such effects in that, *not only* were particular interactions with certain colleagues emotionally affecting, upsetting, and distressing, *but also* the cumulative effect of working in a context where, as one participant observed, "BME staff often feel like imposters" and/or where scared white mentors excluded BME faculty from networks, formed a negative, corrosive, or emotionally-wearisome constraint on their personal lives, their career, and co-worker relations. Josie comments:

You can't work at a university without meeting downright nasty people. Academics are prickly blighters at the best of times. I don't mind these—many is the time; I've locked the door and cried... That

I can cope with. Shit happens and I'm black, so a lot of shit happens. What I really struggle with is the constant feeling that I'm held back, pushed down, and kept away from the club just because of the colour of my skin. [BME, Female, Mentee, Senior Lecturer, 36, 5 years in current post]

4.4 | Getting a 'real' mentor is rare

Typically, BME mentees rejected suggestions by other parties (such as university claims) that formal mentoring systems were *in any way* effective for BME mentees. In this regard, many existing mentoring relationships were perceived as superficial, artificial, or inauthentic. Thus, BME participants contrasted ineffective university-run formal mentoring systems with what they described as 'real' or 'genuine' mentoring (what the mentoring literature refers to as positive mentoring, see Eby et al., 2000) as far removed from their own experiences. Some participants were scathing:

Formal mentoring at universities is a joke. We don't get mentoring—not real mentoring. We get lip service and orders to jump higher than I can from old white-guys who can only parrot and who've no idea of the obstacles we face every day! [BME, Male, Mentee, Senior Lecturer, 44, 2 years in current post]

Mentees commonly spoke of the problems of poor mentoring; ranging from wasted time to demotivation to disenfranchisement. Only one BME participant had been fortunate to find a 'real mentor' in their first employing university (via a research post funded by their PhD supervisors' external grant). Typically, BME participants had a very different experience of UK university mentoring. Joachim talks of his PhD cohort, all of whom wanted a career in academia:

Of the four of us [all BME] who started, I would say that two gave up and left because they didn't get any real help—any real mentoring. The third, went to industry in the hope he'd flourish there, and I moved universities twice before I found somebody willing to spend time and effort to help me. Three universities before I found somebody who was prepared to give me an honest opinion. It wasn't nice but it was right. It hurt but thank God he has the *cojones* to tell me! [BME, Male, Mentee, Senior Lecturer, 34, 3 years in current post]

In this regard, for many academics, mentoring systems fail to the point that they feel the need to seek out mentors outside of their institution, within their academy.

The emotional toll of such activities is viewed by mentees as far from inconsiderable. In this regard, participants argued that, while white early career academics also face career mentoring difficulties, BME early career academics are more typically required actively to seek out 'genuine' mentors. As such, BME mentees argue that they face additional emotional stresses within failing mentoring systems because of their skin colour:

The reality is that, if I want a mentor who actually cares, I need to get my own. The university isn't interested in me or interested in what it means to be a BME academic. It's interested in REF or a tick box of 'we are an equal opportunities employer'—they are blind to us—they are bureaucrats with blinkers firmly lodged in place. Does that upset me? Damn right it does! It is a daily fight against a megalthic entity with the sensitivity of stone! [BME, Female, Mentee, Lecturer, 33, 2 years in current post]

As such, BME mentees' perceptions of formal mentoring systems were negative and consequently they feel the additional burden of seeking informal mentoring outside of the formal system.

4.5 | Getting a 'real' mentor costs!

While real mentoring for some was perceived as an altruistic act or professional responsibility, for many mentees, the reciprocal nature of such links was viewed in more instrumental terms. For some mentoring could be viewed as simply transactional:

I've spoken with friends who've told me—if you go there, you'll only get help if you give Professor X your papers [adding the name of the Professor to the paper]. Mentoring to the old school needs currency. [BME, Female, Mentee, Lecturer, 33, 2 years in current post]

In this regard, the academic and emotional labour (see Ogbonna & Harris, 2004) of being a mentee is important as it speaks to the informal reward structures of universities which subvert equality, diversity, and inclusion policies, as well as to universities as hierarchical institutions in which BME labour is being used for white colleagues' institutional/academic gain. One example is that adding the typically white mentor's name to an article undermines the BME researcher's full contribution because of pre-existing negative stereotypes.

The transactional view of mentoring (see Scandura & Williams, 2004) was also apparent where participants recognised that potential mentors were limited in their time and needed to be courted. As such, astute BME academics seeking mentoring, accepted that to develop a meaningful relationship, dues in the form of time, effort, engagement, and respect should be paid to attract mentors. For example, Joanne refers to her mentor who has supported her and her career through three promotions (from part-time research assistant) and four institutional moves:

There is no such thing as a free meal. Don't get me wrong—really, really, really not complaining here! Bloody grateful I am! But the pay back is actually pay up front—support me, support my causes, support my group, work in my area, pay your respect, and then we'll talk. [BME, Female, Mentee, Senior Lecturer, 44, 4 years in current post]

However, for BME participants with 'real mentors', their developed relationships were viewed (retrospectively) as one that built on mutual respect and connection through similar work-oriented interests from research themes to approaches to pedagogy. For example:

I think you start off thinking that mentors will simply emerge, and they will be there altruistically guiding the next generation! Yeah, I know [laughs]! To develop a real mentor—someone who'll sponsor you—takes time—a lot of time, connecting with them, working on things they want, helping them and even after that, they'll want their names on papers, access to data, companies, whatever—they'll want payback. Nuthin' gets you nuthin'! Only fair, I guess! [BME, Male, Mentee, Senior Lecturer, 41, 7 years in current post]

In this way, even for mentees with mentors that they acknowledged as helpful, BME mentees were largely pragmatic in their view of the costs (and benefits) of what they considered real mentoring.

5 | CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study addressed important questions in relation to: how BME academics perceive, reflect, and interpret the effectiveness of the mentoring they receive at their institutions; how they perceive the nature of organizational policies and responses in contributing to their experiences, and; how they rationalise their experiences. Our findings lead to the forwarding of four contributions and implications for theory and practice.

The first contribution of our study is to the literature on race and mentoring and is derived from the documentation and exploration of the lived experiences of mentoring by BME academics. Previous research has highlighted the limited understanding of the role of race in mentoring and similar organizational interventions (see Ogbonna, 2019; Scandura, 1998; Wanberg et al., 2003) and especially the ways in which mentoring helps or hinders the career paths of BME academics (see Bhopal, 2020; Byars-Winston et al., 2020; Muller et al., 2012). Our findings reveal varying BME perceptions and interpretations of university mentoring which commonly revolved around negative experiences.

Our findings build on the conclusions of a recent study of BME and mentoring UK universities. Specifically, although Bhopal (2020) found that different BME groups responded differently to various aspects of mentoring, (e.g. the importance of mentors and mentees sharing racial ties), the overall conclusion remained that mentoring has not been a successful strategy of increasing diversity in the senior management ranks of UK higher education institutions. However, while Bhopal (2020) focussed on senior academics who may have developed the skills of navigating university processes with or without the support of university mentors, our study explored the mentoring experiences of BMEs across a fuller spectrum of academic career hierarchy. Especially significant is that we explored the experiences of early career academics who are in particular need of mentoring and career guidance. In this way, our findings reflect a broader account of the perceptions, reflections, and interpretations of mentoring that capture a fuller dynamics of BME academics careers.

A second contribution is to the wider literature on race discrimination in that we call for an extension of understanding of workplace race discrimination and the manifestations of such acts. The evidence from BME mentees presented a general perception that mentoring was failing them. Of particular significance was the widespread perception of differential treatment which BME mentees internalised as being the result of their racial dissimilarity from their predominantly white mentors (for example, where networks were opened only to mentor 'clones'). In some respects, our findings concur with already established theoretical and empirical insights on the labour market discrimination of BME groups in employment in general such as the insidious effects of ethnic penalty (see Berthoud, 2000) and the role of social (Behtoui & Neegaard, 2010) and organization culture capital (see Ogbonna, 2019) in promoting and perpetuating racial disadvantage.

However, our findings introduce an additional layer of workplace race discrimination which has received little scrutiny. Specifically, our study highlights the importance of mentees' perceptions of mentors' sincerity and authenticity in their interpretation of fairness (e.g. 'closed' mentor interactions). Previous research has alluded to workplace race discrimination as partly the result of cultural and systemic processes at institutional and structural levels designed to protect 'white spaces' (e.g. Ahmet, 2021) or to deal with 'white fragility' (e.g. DiAngelo, 2019). However, the finding that mentees attributed their negative outcomes from mentoring to their perception of the behaviour of their mentors which they internalised as driven by the fear of 'not getting things wrong' is instructive. This provides a potentially powerful insight into the significance of interpersonal racism in contrast to the widespread understanding of institutional race discrimination. Thus, we argue that it is important to incorporate focal persons' perceptions of the 'authenticity' and 'sincerity' of the party with whom they interact in exploring drivers of racism in general and outcomes from mixed dyadic relationships such as cross-race mentoring in particular.

The third contribution is to the wider literature on mentoring and arises from the ways in which the mentees in demographically dissimilar mentoring relationships rationalised their experiences. This contribution relates to the common classification of mentoring as positive (e.g. Eby et al., 2000) or negative (e.g. Scandura, 1998). Our findings suggest that perceptions of good and bad mentoring in cross-race relationships may not be as straightforward as in relationships involving individuals of the same ethnic background. Specifically, our evidence demonstrates that not all examples that mentees perceived as bad mentoring were the result of intentional acts by the mentors concerned. Indeed, in some instances, participants rationalised the behaviours they perceived as evidence of poor mentoring as 'defensive' responses of mentors who were not comfortable or familiar with the social conventions in dealing with individuals from different racial origins.

The above findings not only add to the complexity of interpersonal racial discrimination discussed earlier but also raise the question of whether cross-race mentoring relationships in racialised contexts are heavily undermined by

pre-existing stereotypical assumptions (see Brief & Barsky, 2000) and normative racialised responses which combine to disadvantage BME mentees (see also Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Ray, 2019). Thus, what may be interpreted as (and perhaps rightly so) as poor mentoring may, in fact, be the normative responses of white people in dealing with people from BME backgrounds in a racialised society. This suggests two implications. The first is the need to extend understanding of the factors that influence mentoring individuals that are demographically dissimilar from the mentor (in this case cross-race relationships) beyond the initial classification of good and bad to include the range of motives that may be implicated. Indeed, even in cases where mentors may intend to be good, the normative responses of white mentors and the stereotypes they hold of BME people may be such powerful influences that their actions may emerge negative or are perceived as negative. The second implication is potentially more profound in that eradicating racism without radical action will be difficult in the context where this is found to be enshrined in normative (and even defensive) behaviours of racially dissimilar mentors or superiors in organisations.

The fourth contribution relates to the role of the organizational context, policies and responses in promoting and maintaining racism. Specifically, we contribute what we describe as 'context unfavourability' in understanding how organisations contribute to the negative experiences of people from BME backgrounds. This context is one in which race is treated as neutral rather than a key characteristic that defines individual experiences (see Tate & Bagguley, 2017; Joseph-Salisbury, 2019; see also discussions of colour-blind racism, e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2006). As such, policies and practices (such as mentoring) are presented as neutral despite the disproportionate impacts they have on people from BME backgrounds. As mentioned previously, the unfavourable contexts for BME academics have remained despite evidence of institutional racism in UK universities (e.g. EHRC, 2019).

Research contributions that have pointed to evidence of the psychological consequences of academic work for people from BME backgrounds help to underline the impact of such context unfavourability (see Arday, 2022; Bhopal, 2016, 2020; Williams et al., 2019). Indeed, existing research evidence attributes the poor representation and promotion records of BME academics to the pernicious effects of institutional racism (e.g. UCU, 2019). Our findings suggest that the major reasons for the failure of mentoring for BME academics are linked to both context unfavourability and the reluctance of managers to make the changes required. For example, although the mentoring literature suggests that mentoring is more likely to be effective where there is a match in (a) values (e.g. Allen & Eby, 2003) and (b) commitment levels (Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005) or indeed (c) race (see Zambrana et al., 2015) of mentors and mentees, universities routinely allocate mentors to mentees without regard to these crucial factors. Indeed, evidence from the study finds little evidence that universities invest in training mentors to overcome any deficiency their system may have. BME staff consequently perceive mentoring as an annual bureaucratic exercise rather than the meaningful developmental activity that career aspirants desire and that the literature positions as good or positive mentoring (see Byars-Winston et al., 2015; Eby et al., 2008).

6 | CONCLUSIONS

This study was driven by a desire to understand how BME academics perceive, reflect, and interpret the effectiveness of the mentoring they receive at their institutions, how they perceive the nature of organizational policies and responses in contributing to their experiences, and how they rationalise their experiences. The conclusion of this exercise is less than positive. While some evidence of well-intentioned practice emerges, BME faculty widely perceive many mentors as failing, most mentoring systems as biased, resulting in unconstructive and damaging experiences of university mentoring. Without wholesale changes in attitudes, practices, and orientations the continuance of this situation seems frustratingly inevitable. Such changes will require university policy makers to recognise that their colour-blind policy approaches are failing BME academics and they should undertake comprehensive audit of their processes, systems, and practices to identify and change those that may appear benign but that nevertheless have racialised implications and outcomes.

Although it is understandable for some to place the blame for these issues on existing mentors, such a focus seems superficial at best. The key to genuine change here is avoiding treating the unpleasant symptoms for the more noble aim of treating the disease. Here policy and policy makers need to recognise, accept, and then challenge the existing status quo and adopt policy change designed to position the elimination of racial discrimination at the heart of reformed mentoring systems that recognise and incorporate such issues into the very fabric of systems and procedures.

Finally, although this study reveals a number of interesting insights, it is useful to highlight some of the potential limitations which future scholars might address. The first is that the study might have revealed additional insights into the dynamics of mentoring relationships if we had incorporated the perspectives of mentors. Future studies will benefit from extending this study to incorporate the views of mentors. A second potential limitation is that we studied BME academics as a group even though we recognise that there are potential disparities between and within racial and ethnic groups which may be compounded by other demographic characteristics. Indeed, given that gender and religion emerged as significant in some of the interviews, it seems likely that research contributions adopting inter-sectional analyses will be especially worthwhile.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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